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**Re-imagining Race and Representation:
The Black Body in the Nation of Islam**

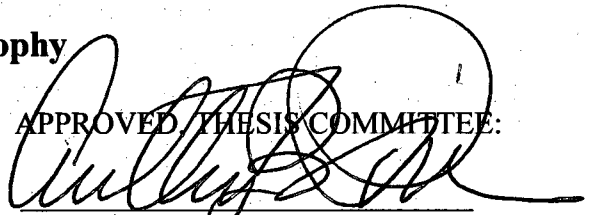
by

Stephen Carl Finley

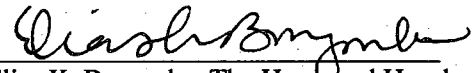
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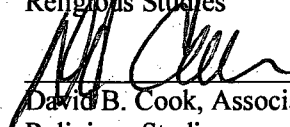
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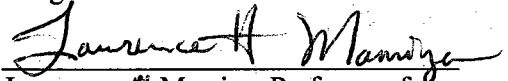
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ABSTRACT

Re-imagining Race and Representation:

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By

Stephen C. Finley

As a project located in the academic field of the study of African American religion, this dissertation examines the black body in four critical moments of the Nation of Islam (NOI), represented by the ministries of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan. Defined as the material locus of the self and the site of the symbolization of a given collective culture and cosmology, the project argues that *the body* was the central concern in all four moments in their religious efforts to re-imagine, reform, and re-present bodies that they perceived had been distorted, disfigured, and devalued by racist violence, discourses, and oppression in America. The research contends that the NOI was only partially “successful” in its reformatory efforts to reconstitute and valorize black bodies. Utilizing the hermeneutical frameworks of critical social theory, which includes psychoanalysis, philosophy of embodiment (phenomenology) and race, and a theory and method based approach to the study of religion in its analysis and interpretation, the project suggests that the NOI may have internalized many of the dynamics and values of white supremacy and, as a consequence, *re-produced* and *re-deployed* its own system of intra-“race” marginalization and hierarchical classification within the NOI and in the greater African American

community. Such discrimination was predicated upon an ideal black bodily economy that ranked bodies based on indicators such as gender, sexuality, and skin complexion. As a result of having co-opted middle-class American and African American values and practices, the research concludes that the NOI converted problematic issues of “race” into an ambiguous and indeterminate class system in their response to the exigencies of the conditions of existence for African Americans. The research suggests both the need for greater attention to the body in African American religious studies, analyses of the co-constitutive elements of class, gender, race, and sexuality, and for reflexive consideration of the ways in which systems of domination may be socially reproduced and/or disrupted by marginalized collectivities.

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Introduction

The rituals of the slave auction and multifarious practices of lynching, particularly those that occurred after the abolition of slavery, whose function, along with discursive, oppressive, and discriminatory practices, was to maintain the social order, had a particular effect on the construction of black bodies as objects.¹ In order to maintain or to create a space in which African Americans could experience authentic humanity, African American religion created spaces as resources for liberation and subjectivity.² The Nation of Islam (NOI) was an important religious institution in this endeavor. This dissertation will map the construction of the black body at critical moments in the history of the NOI, in particular during the lives and influences of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan, making critical notation of the ways in which these four moments were consistent with one another and ways in which they were in conflict.

The study will argue that while historical moments may have offered new challenges due to changing historical, political, and institutional realities, the body remained the central focus in the theology and rituals of the NOI. Furthermore, the attention to the body was made necessary by the exigencies of race and racism. While some want to understand “*race*” as an illusory social construct and not as a valid scientific category, dismissing it as un-“real,” notions of raciality had and continue to

¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

² Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 180-3, 187-8.

have concrete consequences and affects for African Americans. In terms of social ontology, which emphasizes the experience of racialization *as real*, according to Lucius Outlaw, “race” is very tangible in its effects on those, such as African Americans, who are negatively racialized.³ George Yancy expresses my concern most for the concept of race as a social ontology poignantly:

The problem with this [i.e., rejecting the notion of race], however, is that phenomenological or *lived* intelligibility and reality of ‘race’ exceed what is deemed ‘real’ within a physicalist ontology. Indeed, one can reject the concept of race from a physicalist perspective, and yet engage in various forms of social performance that are racist. In other words, one can live/embody the *fiction* that generates *real effects* in the real world. It is also important to note that to believe that there is no more to be said about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatio-temporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony.⁴

³ Lucius T. Outlaw. *On Race and Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996, 7-9.

⁴ George Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Duquesne University, 2005, 61-2. See also, Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Study of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1999), 120-1; 180, 184. Here, Long talks about the creation of African Americans and Native Americans through Western hegemony and violence. This discursive project through which race became a concrete reality he calls the “second creation.”

Yancy comments on the reality of race as lived intelligibility or the notion that one can experience race as concrete despite the fact that it is not a biological ontology. Indeed, this is an important conversation because even if *race* is seen as a *fiction*, such a narrative is embodied in a way, suggests Yancy, that the notion generates genuine experiences. To that end, the history of African Americans is superfluous with examples of the consequences of race. Set against a history of slavery, lynching, symbolic violence, and systematic oppression, the NOI was responding to imposed racialized conditions of existence that distorted and disfigured black bodies. This is not to suggest, however, that the bodies that were constructed in an attempt to “re-imagine and re-present the race” were all positive. In fact, some responses to the experiences of racism were projected onto marginalized members of African American communities like women and poor people, for instance.

Literature Review

Few studies have explicitly investigated the “black body” in a study of the Nation of Islam, but Edward Curtis’ study, “Islamizing the Black Body: Power and Ritual in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam”⁵ is an exception. Curtis argues that the black body in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam was a religious body that was formed in/by the

⁵ See Edward E. Curtis, IV. “Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12.2 (2002): 167-96.

processes of ritualization. He debates with C. Eric Lincoln,⁶ who, according to him, suggested that the Nation of Islam was neither very “Islamic” nor “religious.”

Furthermore, Curtis maintains, Lincoln believed that the nomenclature and categories of Islam did little more than veil in religious language black resentment for whites. He concedes, however, that Lincoln later modifies this position, ascribing religious significance to the movement.⁷

Conversely, he contends that it is an error to characterize Elijah Muhammad as a black nationalist. Rather, for him, Muhammad was primarily a religious-prophetic leader, not a political leader who advocated the goal of creating, controlling, and defending a black nation-state.⁸ Here, he debates Lincoln and E. U. Essien-Udom, who classify Muhammad as a black nationalist, and Essien-Udom identifies only a few practices in the Nation of Islam that he considers rituals, in contradistinction to Curtis’ notion of ritualization, which allows for a more expansive view of what are ritualized modes of behavior.⁹

⁶ C. Eric Lincoln. *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994)

⁷ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 167.

⁸ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 179-80.

⁹ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 179. See also, E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Using the term “Islamizing,” Curtis indicates that he is concerned with the process of ritualization that Elijah Muhammad and members of the Nation of Islam utilize to confer religious significance upon seemingly mundane human activities and objects.¹⁰ To that end, Curtis infers that the black body in Muhammad’s Nation of Islam was a construction of this ritualization process, a body that symbolized the entire black race.¹¹ He asserts:

What I am describing is not uniform behavior among NOI members but a religious process of ritualization in which persons participated to a greater or lesser degree. Moreover, the success and significance of this ritualization should be understood not as some isolated response to black urban anxieties over the black body but as a religious process connected to—rather than determined by—these anxieties and even more directly to the contexts of social powerlessness and oppression in which they emerge.¹²

He spends the larger portion of the article developing this notion and elucidating the power dynamics inherent in ritualization, particularly given the use of Islamic categories

¹⁰ Curtis’ article is somewhat ambiguous regarding my conclusion here, given that he never explains what is religious about the body or the Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, nor does he define the body. Furthermore, he fails in his attempt to connect effectively religion and the body because he is equally ambiguous about the religious nature of ritualization or “Islamizing.”

¹¹ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 186.

¹² Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 176-7.

and language. He argues, generally, that by choosing to call his movement and rituals “Islamic,” Muhammad empowers, constrains, and limits the body that is constructed therein.

Likewise, power in ritualization functioned, on the one hand, to empower mostly those who controlled the rites, but he also contends that the use of Islamic language gave adherents a language by which to challenge whiteness and Christianity, which they saw as oppressive. On the other hand, power was constrained, since Muhammad constructed his own prophetic authority and religious legitimacy using the terms and language of Islam, the Qur’an, and his personal bodily relationship to Allah.¹³ That is to say, the movement could only maintain its strength in isolation from the Muslim communities and the media. Intermingling and ostentation would expose the contradictions and conflicts in Muhammad’s ideology and form of Islam. Finally, this ritualization also dominates those who are involved as participants since, I assume, favorable entry into the desired spaces of the organization require acquiescence to ritualization, forcing participants to negotiate this with the power of resistance and reward that ritualization offers them. Included in this resistance and reward was the co-optation of black middle-class values.

Given that most of the members of the Nation of Islam were working-class, the clean living and economic emphases allowed members to assimilate values that were previously associated with the Black Church and Black fraternal and sororal organizations. According to Curtis, Alexander Crummell associated these values with civilization. Taking the lead from Wilson J. Moses, Curtis subsequently characterizes the

¹³ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 181.

Nation of Islam as “civilizationist.”¹⁴ But this concept indicates more than just a superficial adoption of middle-class values for Curtis. He sees it as a form of social protest, maintaining that:

In the cases of the Nation of Islam, working-class African Americans created a religious culture that, like the black working-class youth culture of the postwar era, identified the black body as a locus of social protest. But rather than negating traditional black Christian middle-class ideals, members appropriated them within a new Islamic matrix. That is, NOI recast civilizationism in a way that rejected its associations with black middle-class Christian ideology while preserving some of its most fundamental norms. Put in terms of a simple semiotic exercise: The ritualized body was a sign.¹⁵

He suggests that with this “sign” members of the Nation of Islam separated the signifier, that is, the ritualized body, from what was generally signified, in other words an assimilation of the values, norms, and beliefs of the [white] oppressor. Instead, the old signifier now points to a new signified, “the Islamized black body.”¹⁶ The nomenclatures

¹⁴ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 177. Crummell, speaking at the Atlanta and Cotton States Exhibition in 1895, said that civilization involved: 1) a clarity from false heathen ideas, 2) consciousness of personal responsibility, 3) recognition of the body as a sacred gift, 4) honor, freedom, and family duty of womanhood, 5) the sense of social progress, 6) elevated use of material things and industrial activities, and 7) education.

¹⁵ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 178.

¹⁶ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 178.

and categories of Islam, then, allowed them to rename black uplift motifs and to differentiate them from other mundane activities and other movements.

Although Curtis' work is important, it nevertheless fails to examine the black body in the NOI in a comprehensive fashion. In other words, his work fails to demonstrate the various ways in which rituals and theology in the NOI reflect social concerns other than class consciousness. The article totally misses the relationship between the rituals and the construction of gender and sexuality within the NOI, for example. At the same time, Curtis also makes the mistake of tacitly affirming the androcentric and heterosexist formation of the black body by failing to offer a critique of it. In fact, it ignores gender and sexuality almost completely. Furthermore, his study is limited in scope. By concentrating on the black body only during the life and times of Elijah Muhammad, the study ignores an opportunity to map the body through critical historical moments that may suggest ways in which Muhammad's predecessors interpreted the rituals and theology that he developed. A more complete treatment of the body within the NOI may have revealed a more complex and nuanced understanding of body and the social system it reflected. What's more, he never defines the body in question.

Other texts are implicitly relevant to the NOI and the body. Consider, for instance, Edward Curtis' book, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African American Islamic Thought*. It is tenuously related to the body in the sense that it is concerned with African American Muslim identity. Here, Curtis argues that the defining feature of African American Islam is the tension between the universal, or what it means to be Muslim, and the particular, namely, what it means to be black.

Amina Beverly McCloud in her book, *African American Islam*, describes the same tension, utilizing the nomenclature “*ummah*,” which refers to the universal community of Muslims and “*asabiya*” which indicates tribal affiliation as an organizing principle that allows her to discuss the various Muslim religious groups among African Americans.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Curtis and McCloud suggest that the NOI and other black Islamic groups are viewed pejoratively for their emphasis on the particular or the “*asabiya*.” For this reason, Curtis maintains, African American religious groups do not receive fair treatment in scholarship. Like with many other texts related to the NOI and the body, both Curtis’ and McCloud’s texts are limited in their scope, referring only to identity in terms of a linear notion of racial identity rather than one that “incorporates” class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and other critical indicators of identity.

Richard Brent Turner’s book, *Islam in the African American Experience*, is another text that is relevant to the NOI and the body. Here, Turner employs a theory of signification to interpret the history of Islam among African Americans. He suggests that African American Muslims used the strategy of naming themselves and re-naming

¹⁷ Amina Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

Warith Deen Mohammed wrestles with the same issues of the universal and the particular most poignantly in his book *African American Genesis* (Calumet City, IL: M.A.C.A. Publications, 1986). In fact, this text is quite apologetic in the sense that it argues that Islam is the remedy for the problems that face African Americans. He maintains that only Islam can restore nobility to African American identity and establish a group spirit and identity through Islamic morality and practice.

themselves and their religious organizations in order to signify the people they want to be and as a counter-hegemonic response to racist discourse that demeaned and devalued the humanity of black people.

In doing so, Turner uncovers an essential strategy that African American Muslims, including the NOI, utilized to give new meaning and value to the body.¹⁸ He indicates that this practice has its roots in West African Islam. He explains:

Signification and jihad (the struggle for the truth in the way of God) are the analytical keys that explain resistance in the lives of the African Muslims noted above and in the biographical sketches that follow. For African Muslim slaves preserved their Islamic identities by refusing to internalize the Christian racist significations that justified the system of exploitation. These were profound acts of resistance to an institution that had set the terms for pre-twentieth-century racial discourse in America, attempting to eradicate all aspects of African

¹⁸ Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 1-4. cf. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2004). Other texts may be relevant in the sense that they explore NOI theology, rituals, and search for identity, all of which provide some insight into the meaning of the body in the NOI. See, for example, E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962); Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*; Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African American Identity: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005).

heritage in the slave quarters by stripping slaves of their culture, leaving them powerless. As African Muslims signified themselves as the people they wanted to be in America, they transformed Islam to meet the demands of survival and resistance in the 'strange Christian land.' Their significations turned their history, religion, and genealogies into 'an instrument of identity and transformation' in America.¹⁹

For Turner, this dynamic is found in the MTSA, the NOI, and in Sunni and other forms of Islam practiced by African Americans, and it gave them a sense of personhood, agency, humanity, and visibility.²⁰

He suggests that this signifying is one of the defining features of African American Islam, providing a meaningful manner in which to be Muslim and also be black, but like Curtis, Turner not only totally ignores gender and sexuality, he fails to record the manner in which African American Muslims' rituals like naming interact with other rituals and theology to construct meaning and identity for Muslims. In so doing, he misses the rich and complex ways in which the body participates in signifying counter-hegemonic discourses and becomes itself the site of complex religious meaning.

Another text that is relevant to this study is Doris Witt's *Black Hunger: Food and Politics of U.S. Identity*.²¹ Witt argues that an integral relationship exists in the United

¹⁹ Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 24.

²⁰ Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 48.

²¹ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

States, and particularly among African Americans, between food and the construction of masculinity and heterosexuality. Although much of the book ostensibly explores food and femininity, her primary intent appears to be the critique of black masculinity and heterosexuality and to demonstrate the frequent conflation of food and gender, especially in the NOI which views both certain foods and women as “poisons.” Furthermore, she argues that gay white men and privileged white women have used the relationship between black women and food to construct their identities. More importantly for my study, however, is the lengthy chapter called “‘Pork or Women’: Purity and Danger in the Nation of Islam.”²² In effort to counter the meanings of foods like ‘chitlins’ [*sic*] with slavery, Witt suggests that Elijah Muhammad came to embody black masculinity and represented it as opposed to white supremacy. At the same time, Muhammad represented blackness in its ideal sense, not only as male but also as misogynistic and homophobic.

This is an important conversation for African Americans, according to Witt, because it may help to explain why black manhood is associated with being anti-woman and anti-gay:

The fascination with the Nation leader and his teachings thus perhaps stemmed, at least in part, from the fact that he was not simply addressing but also embodying the precarious status of black masculinity in U.S. culture. In this sense, a discussion of the NOI can provide further insights as to why black men are possibly associated with misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Judaism. They

²² Witt, *Black Hunger*, 102-25. See also, Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

have historically functioned as the site of cultural anxiety in no small part because black masculinity has foregrounded the inevitable failures of the practices of othering through which hegemonic American identities have emerged.²³

Hence, what she argues here ultimately is that through the corporealization of black masculine ideology, Muhammad “others” black femininity and homosexuality rather than white supremacy. The symbol of the ‘chitlin’ as the master signifier of slave food is also a matter that may beg for psychoanalytic interpretation, given that it represents “filth” projected onto femininity and homosexuality for the NOI but also because as intestines ‘chitlins’ represent the passageway between the inner and outer boundaries of the body that may point to areas of entry into the body that may elicit anxiety about male homosexuality.

Witt’s book is very helpful regarding issues of gender and sexuality but in a very limited scope, since the chapter that she devotes to the subject only engages the role that food plays in its construction. Again, numerous rituals and theological ideas, beyond food rituals, converge in complex ways to construct gendered (generally male) bodies within the NOI. Furthermore, this piece and others discussed above also fail to explore how the terror of white supremacy, slavery, lynching, and various forms of oppression motivated the re-imagining and re-construction of the black body in the NOI and how dietary codes, rituals, and theology reflect those social anxieties. Moreover, like Curtis’

²³ Witt, *Black Hunger*, 104.

work, it is myopic in scope with respect to its failure to map the body through various historical moments within the NOI and to discuss the meaning of *the body*.

One text that is extremely fluid in its theoretical argument regarding African American religion and the body is Anthony Pinn's *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*.²⁴ Pinn's work theorizes about the nature and meaning of Black religion, and in doing so describes the way in which the black body is constructed. It is important for my study because black religion in this text refers to the NOI as well as the Black Church. Pinn theorizes that the genesis Black religion, in part, was a response to the terror that has its historic roots in the African American experience, namely, slavery and oppression. By "terror," Pinn has in mind an ever-present and all-encompassing sense of fear that one could be killed, and one's family could be separated through the sale of black bodies into slavery that was inseparable from the existential reality of African Americans. He locates the origins of this terror in the slave auction and in lynching, which he refers to as "rituals of reference."²⁵ These rituals, Pinn argues, stripped African Americans of a prior sense of self, serving to fix black identity as objects, and making reality absurd.

Black religion, including the NOI, represents an attempt to counter this reality, and is characterized by what Pinn calls a "quest for complex subjectivity," a push or desire for "fullness" and more life meaning in the ultimate sense, to be known over a variety of life indicators and factors, rather than the limitations on identity that are

²⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*.

²⁵ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 47-77.

inherent in the notions of race.²⁶ The black body in African American religion, then, reflects these social concerns, namely, this concern for complex subjectivity and ultimate meaning. What is unique about this study in relation of others is the insightful manner in which it associates the black body with the experience terror and ritual.

What it does not provide, however, is a comprehensive and expanded cartographical approach to the body in the NOI in the historical moments that concern my study. And while Pinn's study certainly hints at the construction of gender and sexuality, it does not go far enough in its analysis of the ways in which an expansive understanding of NOI rituals and theology participate in constructing black bodies within the organization. Finally, Pinn's discussion of the black body in the NOI is descriptive and lacks an in depth critique of its construction, meaning, and function within the NOI.

Therefore, the significant questions that arise from this literature review around which this dissertation is oriented are: 1) What was the "*nature*" of the black body that the NOI found so objectionable that they sought to re-imagine and reconstitute it? 2) How does this black body change through the four historical moments that concern this dissertation? 3) What is the relationship between the black body in the NOI, the social structure of the NOI, and its cosmology?

As a project located in the academic field of the study of African American religion, this dissertation will utilize the hermeneutical tools offered by theory of religion, critical social theory, which includes psychoanalysis, and the philosophy of race and embodiment in its methods of analysis and interpretation.

²⁶ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 173-4.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One, “The Nation of Islam and Black Bodies in Contexts,” will suggest that the NOI was responding to a particular type of black body that was constructed through racist Western philosophical discourses as well as actual violence. This body was negatively racialized, and the NOI sought to reform the physical body and the body as a social symbol. The chapter utilizes Mary Douglas’s theory of “dirt” to give theoretical coherence to how and why black bodies were treated violently in society, by the dominant culture. Douglas’ theory tries to ascertain the reason for the ubiquitous concerns for purity in various cultures. She suggests that “dirt” is a symbolic category that refers to “matter out of place” in taxonomies that order social systems to make the world intelligible. Subsequently, the project proposes the theory, black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*, and argues that the black bodies that were negated and constructed as grotesque were considered no threat to the social order. These were black bodies *in-place*. In response, the NOI, in the four historical moments represented by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan, constructed bodies that were viewed as *out-of-place* socially and symbolically, and therefore were perceived to be a threat to the social system and as *dangerous*. Finally, the chapter traces the history of the NOI and points to significant moments that indicate concerns for the body.

Chapter Two, “Elijah Muhammad, Yakub, and the Critique of “Whitenized” Black Bodies: Black Bodies *In-Place* as Antithetical to the Divine Nature,” explores Elijah Muhammad’s critique of black bodies *in-place*. These are bodies that, for him, had

been “whitenized” ideologically by Christianity. The Nation considered these bodies deplorable and viewed them as functioning in service of white domination of black communities, in that they internalized and promulgated the slave master’s religion, Christianity—a religion that was used to enslave African Americans and keep them dominated.

Chapter Three, “Re-imagining the Race and Re-presentation: Elijah Muhammad, Transcendent Blackness, and the Construction of Ideal Black Bodies,” will address Elijah Muhammad’s creative project in which he used certain rituals such as the dress codes and dietary regulations and discourses such as the narrative of Yakub to construct ideal black bodies which would have the benefit of practices that could make them physically vibrant and theologies and mythologies that could give them new meaning beyond earthly sociopolitical and historical space. The chapter argued, however, that Muhammad privileged the symbolic over the social (i.e., the physical body). As a religious leader, he was not concerned with physically engaging an unjust and oppressive social system but rather with making religious disciples, who lived separately, so to speak, given that they believed that they had a unique hold on truth.

Chapter Four, “Malcolm X and Black Bodies *Out-of-Place*: Visible Bodies, Language, and the Implied Critique of Elijah Muhammad,” examines Malcolm X and his thought and practices that have relevance for black bodies. The chapter will argue that Malcolm reversed or inverted Elijah Muhammad’s paradigm, in that Malcolm gave greater importance to black bodies *out-of-place* socially. As a matter of fact, Malcolm questioned and critiqued his mentor’s commitment to and privileging of symbolic *out-of-placeness*, which meant that they were largely irrelevant and distant from the

sociopolitical activities that directly affected African Americans. This subtle rejection of Muhammad's millenarianism and the expansion of Malcolm's own understanding of his community (i.e., not just the NOI but African American Christians, other ethnicities, and black women tenuously) occurred before his much-lauded hajj to Mecca, contrary to popular conceptions.

Chapter Five, "Warith Deen Mohammed and the Nation of Islam: Race and the Symbolic Valorization Black Bodies *Out-of-Place* in "Islamic" Form," focuses on Warith Deen Mohammed during the time in which he took over the leadership of the NOI and in the subsequent years of the 1980s. The chapter argues that Mohammed raised the importance of both the social and the symbolic, privileging the symbolic like his father Elijah Muhammad, but that he executed them in "Islamic" form, that is, what he understood to be an appropriate Sunni Islam that was particularized for African Americans condition and history in America. In the early years, Mohammed contended, this put him at odds with Arab and immigrant Muslims, and he was also critical of America as he sought to re-define the meaning of black bodies via conversations on race. That is, he spends a great deal of time and energy talking about race because he was attempting to affect the meaning of black bodies as symbols. He sought to dislodge their meanings from the racist social system that had defined them historically.

Chapter Six, "Mothership Connections: Louis Farrakhan as the Culmination of Muslim Ideals and Black Bodies *Out-of-Place* in the Nation of Islam," will interpret Louis Farrakhan's ministry and his notion of black bodies in light of his UFO experience—that is, the vision that he had of being taken into the Mothership in which he reports encountering Master Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad. The chapter argues

that in order to understand the nature of black bodies in Farrakhan's NOI, it is necessary to view them in relationship to the Mothership, which gives them their meaning. Furthermore, for Farrakhan, social and symbolic *out-of-placeness* are both equally important and equally radical, and the acts that illustrate them are explicitly tied to his UFO experience. Finally, Farrakhan is the culmination of Muslim ideals as he embodies the practices and discourses of his predecessors Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Warith Deen Mohammed.

Chapter Seven, "Reforming the Black Body as the Central Concern in the Nation of Islam: Coherence, Contradictions, and Conflicts," will bring coherence to the entire project by making several interpretive claims that may help to explain the nature of the body in the NOI and the reasons why the body was the central concern in each of the four critical moments of interest to this study. Furthermore, the chapter will explore Elijah Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy and suggest that versions of it permeate the NOI's conception of the body in all of the moments in question. Where black bodies vary throughout the history of the NOI, we suggest here, the differences can be attributed to changing conceptions of cosmology and corresponding institutional commitments. To that end, reformation of black bodies can be understood against a problematic confluence of race and class in which the NOI learned to navigate the boundaries of the former but not the latter in that they reproduced a class system within the NOI.

The project suggests that the NOI may have internalized many of the dynamics and values of white supremacy and, as a consequence, *re-produced* and *re-deployed* its own system of intra-race marginalization and hierarchical classification within the NOI and in the greater African American community. As a result of having co-opted middle-

class black and American values and practices, the research concludes that the NOI converted problematic issues of “race” into an ambiguous and indeterminate class system in their response to the exigencies of the conditions of existence for African Americans.

The research suggests both the need for greater attention to the body in African American religious studies, analyses of the co-constitutive elements of class, gender, race, and sexuality, and for reflexive consideration of the ways in which systems of domination may be socially reproduced and/or disrupted by marginalized collectivities.

Chapter One

Black Bodies and the Nation of Islam in Context

As the physical and mental experience of existence,¹ embodiment *is* one's perspective and experience of the world.² More than just an idea, one's embodiment is the concrete location in which all sense experience of the world is processed and interpreted.³ Moreover, it is the focus of ritual activity and religious discourses that are directed at its valorization and its negation. In like manner, discussions and analyses of the embodiment in African American religious communities have recently taken on a new sense of importance in black religious studies,⁴ and in emerging fields that are interested in the study of embodiment as it relates, not solely to the individual, but to

¹ Kate Cregan. *The Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 3.

² See, Lewis R. Gordon. *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1995), 29-34, 102; Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Trans. Colin Smith. *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 235-9; Dermot Moran. *Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 210-3).

³ Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, 34. "The body is consciousness in the flesh or consciousness contextualized. . . Without embodiment, we would simply manifest the anonymous existential choice of being God."

⁴ See, for example, Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds. *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

collectivities such as the Nation of Islam and group interactions—both within the religious community and with the exterior world.⁵

Such intellectual attention and scrutiny of the body is aimed at understanding how the body is constituted by the multiple interactions—its own interior mental and physical processes and the exterior dynamics of group and intersubjective relations, through which and in which people become aware of their bodies. Such awareness is not an individual experience, as Drew Leder, author of *The Absent Body*,⁶ reminds us, it is “a profoundly social thing.” He argues:

. . .we are never proto-solopists left to construct a body image in isolation. My awareness of my body is a profoundly social thing, arising out of experiences of the corporeality of other people and of their gaze directed back upon me. Am I fat or thin, beautiful or ugly, clumsy or agile? My self-understanding always involves the seeing of what others see in me. . .bodily objectification and alienation have often been understood as the result primarily from the look of the Other.⁷

⁵ Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body*, 1-2. Cregan notes that studies of the body, until fairly recently, were treated as or read through an “undifferentiated norm,” by which she means that bodies in scholarship were engaged as white, heterosexual, able-bodied, adult, and male.

⁶ Drew Leder. *The Absent Body* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁷ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 91-2.

Leder notes what is significant for this project, namely, the emphasis on social interactions and discourses about bodies that bear on how people see and experience their own bodies. Furthermore, how people come to view their bodies is not simply an individual, private, or solipsistic operation; it is also a function of corporate and collective relations. Jean-Paul Sartre refers to such experiences of the body in his second and third ontological dimensions of the body which he calls the Body as Utilized and Known by the Other and the Body-for-Others, respectively.⁸ That is, body images are constructed primarily through experience of other bodies vis-à-vis social relations and philosophies and mythologies about their bodies.

This notion of social formation of bodies is important for this dissertation because it is concerned with the nature of the NOI's response to such social and discursive activities in which black bodies were constructed, such as violence and racist philosophies. Chapter One will extend this conversation by discussing the body within the relevant literature on embodiment that will later serve as vital interpretive tools. Furthermore, this chapter will offer a theory of the black body as a representation of the discursive and violent dynamics that constructed the body (i.e., a [*mis*]representation) to which the NOI was responding as a religious movement. Finally, this chapter will offer a brief reading of the history of the NOI, noting in particular, moments and practices that indicated their concern for the body and for re-imagining and re-presenting black bodies.

⁸ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 351.

The Body as a Physical Reality and Social Symbol

Both Mary Douglas's and Pierre Bourdieu's social theories offer notions of the body that are extremely helpful in that for both of them the body represents a microcosm of society, a site in which and on which socio-political realities are played out.⁹ In fact, as the medium for the inscription of collective relationships and as the recipient of a given society's values that are codified through discipline and ritual, the body is the site in which a culture or social system reproduces itself.¹⁰ Most importantly the two theorists elucidate the manners in which the body is biological and symbol and how the two are

⁹ See, Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003).

¹⁰ See also, Émile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 245-7, 265-7; Daniel L. Pals. *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102. Durkheim also contends that given social collectivities are reflected in/on the bodies of all of its members, that individual bodies are microcosms of the larger social group. Durkheim's notion of the soul, for instance, can be seen as the inscription of the conscience of the collective that is implanted in and on the bodies of each group member through ritual and group celebrations that reinforce solidarity and commitment to the clan. Here, however, the body is seen not simply to mirror the clan in a 1:1 relationship but to be in tension with it as it seeks its own will and desires. Hence, the body is viewed as profane and negative also because it is individualized, while the collective is sacred.

related. According to Douglas, for example, “The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society.”¹¹

Moreover, Douglas describes the body further as two realities, “two ‘bodies’” that interact, correspond, and exchange meanings, stating:

The physical body is a microcosm of society, facing the centre of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures. Its members, now riveted into attention, represent members of society and their obligations as a whole.¹²

In other words, these insights suggest that the “*body*” is both the material locus of the self and the site of the symbolization of a given social collectivity, that is, biochemical (i.e., physical) and social realities. In short, for instance, treatment of the physical body and the meaning of the body socially and religiously reflect and mirror the concerns and anxieties of a given social system, and again as the citation above notes, the body is both material and metaphor.

Bourdieu is equally as advantageous in establishing and illuminating the body as composite flesh and symbol and indeed as the locus of social replication. His notion of *habitus* suggests that individuals, through non-discursive bodily techniques of social

¹¹ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 72.

¹² Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 80.

reproduction, acquire a set of dispositions,¹³ including habits, tastes, and cultural practices that become second nature, seemingly unconscious.¹⁴ For Bourdieu, these *embodied* dispositions are always “classed” and (gendered)¹⁵ in the sense that *habitus*

¹³ These dispositions are organized as a basic taxonomy of opposition in which the world is appropriated and made intelligible through a classificatory system of binary opposites such as man/woman, day/night, dry/wet. Cf. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 111-2; 157, 165. One will note the similarity, here, between Bourdieu’s notion of intelligibility and Douglas’s. Because of their similarities and relevance to this project, they are both used in my analysis of the body. Their interpretive strength and potency will be seen most clearly in Chapter Seven.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 17, 72, 81-2.

¹⁵ Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell. “Voiced Bodies/Embodied Voices,” in *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference, and Interplay*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 191-2. And I would argue that embodied dispositions or *habitus* are “raced” or raciated, given that gender and race are co-constitutive or both essential elements that occur jointly in how humans generally are recognized and categorized. According to Bradford and Sartwell, “Race and gender cannot be compared because they are in fact inextricable; there are no unraced gendered persons, nor ungendered raced persons. . . racing and gendering are social and political processes of consigning bodies to social categories and thus rendering them into political, economic, sexual, and residential positions. . . And since race and gender intersect in some way every human body and upon which they are rendered.”

will) benefit those in the society who hold power and authority (generally men for Bourdieu), given that their function is to reproduce the established social order, particularly rising in its effectiveness in concert with the degree of cultural homogeneity.¹⁶ Accordingly, “The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g., the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transpositional dispositions...”¹⁷ That is, the hierarchical order of society, which privileges [white]¹⁸ men is socially replicated on and in the bodies of the members of the society through various techniques that constitute *habitus*. Social homogeneity ensures concealment or misrecognition of power relations that are involved in the processes theoretically,¹⁹ given that it then appears “everyday” and naturally occurring. In social arrangements that are much more complex and diverse, it would seem, the power relations that serve to establish classed, gendered, and raced *habitus* might then be in jeopardy of being apprehended, in that the complexity might

¹⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72-82.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

¹⁸ This has been the case historically in America.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 85. “The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation, necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which if one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence.”

allow difference to be seen. This is significant because it reinforces recognition of power relations that could potentially be disrupted. *Habitus*, then, are physical and symbolic, since they reflect the social system and are inhabited.

Habitus become “*em-bodied*” through what Bourdieu calls *bodily hexis*, a complex of modalities of bodily comportment, motor functions, postures, behaviors, facial expressions, tones of voice, and styles of speech along “with a host of social meanings”²⁰ that is *in-corp*-orated through experience and imitation rather than through explicit discourse. The experiential nature of bodily hexis accounts for its durability.²¹ Bourdieu suggests that *bodily hexis* begins with childhood imitations of adults within a given culture, and it suggests that it could also apply to neophytes or new converts of any age to a religious, cultural, or social system (although perhaps with decreasing durability).²²

²⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 87.

²¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 87.

²² This also suggests that successful social replication or the strength of the durability of such replication may depend on inculcating the values and norms of a society of a person at a young age in order that the order of society and its practices may be normalized and naturalized. While I could conceive of the same process working with new converts to a religion, gaining their misrecognition and hence construction of a religious body that reflects the religious collective would seem to be more difficult and hence potentially less durable. Perhaps this may help to explain how and why Malcolm X (see Chapter Four) ultimately had issues with some of the teachings and apolitical practices of Elijah

The body for Bourdieu as for Douglas is a political body in the sense that it is produced by unspoken, undisputed, and “taken for granted” values that are imposed upon dominated classes by those who rule. Bourdieu calls these tacitly posited suppositions and taxonomic systems of classification that appear as self-evident *doxa* or *doxic*.²³

The instruments of knowledge of the social world are in this case (objectively) political instruments which contribute to the reproduction of the social world by producing immediate adherence to the world, seen as self evident and undisputed, of which they are the product and of which they reproduce the structures in a transformed form.²⁴

Doxa becomes epistemologically legitimated by the lower classes in a hierarchically descending manner through *symbolic violence* which obscures power relations that allow it to operate indiscernibly.²⁵ That is to say, the masses accept *as given* the values, perception, and categories of thought imposed upon them by the guarantors of the culture or society and come to acquiesce to the hierarchical social order as desirable, which allows for the perpetuation of the structures of action via the *habitus*.

Muhammad that I argue he evidenced long before he made a religious pilgrimage to Mecca. This may also explain why movement between religious traditions is sometimes fluid.

²³ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164-5.

²⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164.

²⁵ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 190-7.

On the one hand, the oft-cited, authoritative, and rich theories of the body, which is to say Douglas's notion of "two bodies" and Bourdieu's concept of "*habitus*," have enormous interpretive value for the current project. One of the most important insights that they reveal is the way in which the body-is-always-already-reflected-in-social-institutions-is-always-already-reflected-in-cosmology.²⁶ In other words, interpretations of the body necessitate that the interpreter take into consideration differences in forms of social institution or society and the particular cosmology, for they are inextricably intertwined and mutually dependent.²⁷ This means more than just that bodies are socially constructed. It suggests that they are constructed and constrained by institutional commitments and in line with particular views about the world. This will have particular strength in later chapters when we are decoding black bodies in the NOI, that is, attempting to ascertain their meanings and the cosmologies and institutional ideas which they signify. Furthermore, *habitus* and the idea that the appendages of the body "act" as "members" of a given society has significance for reading the body as a "text" for the ways in which it might decipher embedded class, racialized, or religious codes because they offer an opportunity to read the body as a metaphor that reflect given social collectivities. Bourdieu, for instance, contending that *habitus* are classed, suggests that such class entrenchment can be perceived in bodily comportment such as posture and

²⁶ See esp., Mary Douglas, *Cultural Bias* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1978).

²⁷ Or, interpretations of the body are interpretations of the society are interpretations of the cosmology.

gait. What this could mean for this project, first, is that conceptions of the body cannot be isolated from their social settings and [religious] world views, for the practices and discourses that constitute them necessarily reflect institutional commitments and cosmologies. Second, these variables may help to explain the differences in how the body is socially constructed in the four moments of this study.

Notwithstanding their complex interpretive values, Douglas's "two bodies" and Bourdieu's *habitus*, while extremely helpful, may require some modifications as an aggregate or individual definition of the body for our purposes especially with regard to black bodies. First, this dissertation will demonstrate that discursive elements that are involved in the construction of the black body are much more active, explicit, and malevolent than notions of the body as in Douglas's and Bourdieu's seminal texts. What's more, while discourse does play a role in the development of *doxa* and hence the body, a given collectivity's values inculcated via discursive practices for Bourdieu are generally unspoken and taken for granted (i.e., *doxa*), perhaps due to presumed cultural homogeneity.

And again, *habitus* becomes embodied through *bodily hexis*, which is deployed and incorporated primarily through experience rather than explicit discourse. Second, bodies for both Douglas and Bourdieu seem *determined* in the sense that they maintain and reflect the established social relations, i. e., the *status quo*. Third, related to the second point, embodiment in its relation to a given collective or society is *totalizing* for Douglas and Bourdieu. To that end, the body mirrors or mimics the social system, making the existence of a recalcitrant and agential body highly unlikely or at best obscuring and obfuscating its possibility. Anthony Pinn recognized the same problem:

With this in mind, black religion, or black religious expression, entails an effort to move beyond this exchange, beyond the pressures and restrictions of the social system. Whereas Douglas notes a type of concordance between the social and the bodily expression of control, I argue for dissonance between the social and black bodies, a discord that sparks and fuels religion as historical liberation because the former operates through a process of bad faith, on corrupt intentions.²⁸

Rather than eschewing Douglas's definition of the body as inappropriate or incongruent with black bodies, however, Pinn modifies her definition to fit his purposes, in effect articulating a definition that is distinct from hers that affords a space for his concern for "liberation."²⁹ Albeit, this project affirms Pinn's modifications, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari may offer a healthy, more concrete, corrective to Douglas (and Bourdieu) in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*³⁰ that may assist in expanding her notion of the body. For Deleuze and Guattari, what they call the Body without Organs (BwO),³¹ is a body that is always already resistant and never totalized by a given social

²⁸ Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 143.

²⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 143-4.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 30. "A body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs... The body without organs is not a dead body but a living

system. Although the text is abstract and complicated, they seem to apprehend the body as uncoded space that is simultaneously an energy source, that is, recalcitrance. Again, the body never fully mirrors the social system, for it is a limit in the sense that one is forever attaining it. It is always becoming, and something like a residue is always left over,³² hence its resistance and recalcitrance in the face of systems of domination. The BwO is “inorganic,” and only becomes “organic” or gains organs when it is connected to a *machine* or system of production, which includes micro-systems such as the family or macro-systems such as social collectivities or social systems. Therefore, it can never be fully colonized or overcoded regardless of how dominating the systems of production are because it is a potential, always in the process of becoming, always recalcitrant. This notion of the body, then, suggests that the bodies are not automatons that always react in predictable ways as determined by a social system (i.e., an “*organ*”). Rather, they always already maintain the *potential* for emancipatory and disruptive responses to systems of domination.

Black Bodies *In- and- “Out-of-Place”*: A Theory of the Black Body

body all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism and its organization...”

³² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150.

Using a definition of the body as our operating principle that posits the body as already resistant³³ and recalcitrant is helpful here because the goal is to advance a theoretical representation of the black body that the NOI was reforming and re-presenting, which again presupposes agency. The NOI viewed the body that was constructed by the racist American social system as incongruent with its own understanding of black bodies to which they responded through their rituals, theology, and mythology. The very idea that the NOI would counter the practices and discourses that they read as disfiguring to black bodies already presumes and requires the existence of contested space, a chiasm or aperture opened by the continuous existence of competing discourses, a recalcitrant condition that is necessary for the movement and reconfiguration of black bodies.

But what are the textures, the nuances, of this problematic yet agential body? What is the “nature” of the black body constructed in/by the dominant culture that the NOI found repugnant? I wish to suggest that the black body that was anathema in American culture was this recalcitrant black body “*out-of-place*,” to borrow a phrase from Mary Douglas, albeit for the NOI it was the dialectical antithesis, black body “*in-place*” that required reconstitution, for as this project will show, *in-placeness* was

³³ Again, “resistance” as a passive-aggressive notion indicates that body is always resisting being overcoded and totalized by a system which means it always maintains the potential to act in ways that can “liberate” it from systems of domination that have power to overdetermine bodies. This is what I mean when I suggest that black bodies, including those represented by/in the NOI, are “recalcitrant.”

aesthetically and religiously vile to the NOI. To that end, Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*³⁴ suggests a theoretical framework that may assist here in representing these black bodies discursively. Douglas's conception of "dirt" will help to bring coherence to the issue of why the NOI found particular black bodies (*in-place*) decrepit and in need of reform and why the bodies they constructed in response (*out-of-place*) considered ideal to them but dangerous to the dominant culture in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America.

This section will briefly summarize Douglas' theory of "dirt" or "matter out of place," explore the meaning of the black body "*in-place*" in American culture as well as what it means to be *in-place* and *out-of-place*. Finally, this chapter will apply Douglas's notion to "the black body" in order to demonstrate the tension between the body that was constructed by the dominant culture (*in-place*), which was pernicious to the NOI, and the black body (*out- of-place*) that the dominant ("white") culture considered *dangerous*, poisonous, and polluting, arguing in the end, that it was the body that was symbolically and socially fixed *in-place* that distorted and mutilated black bodies. It was the exigencies presented by the experience of this raciated black body that made compulsory the NOI's desire to re-imaging and re-present the race, that African Americans, not just the NOI, might experience authentic humanity.³⁵

³⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

³⁵ This may also infer that the ideology of the NOI to a large extent was dependent on the racialized notions of blackness that were constructed vis-à-vis whiteness for its existence

Perhaps Douglas's most influential theory, her notion of "dirt" in *Purity and Danger* attempts to explain every culture's concern with purity and contagion. She insists that this concern for "order" and tidiness is not just reflected in "primitive" cultures, whose concern with purity some suggest can be explained as a regard for hygiene or, borrowing a term from William James, what she refers to as "medical materialism."³⁶ She argues that much of this concern that cultures have is primarily symbolic rather than a regard for actual dirt, suggesting that, "The more deeply we go into this and similar rules, the more obvious it becomes that we are studying symbolic systems."³⁷ As a result, she wants to offer a universal theory that will make intelligible this ubiquitous concern for cleanliness and order.³⁸ Her claim is simple: cultures develop taxonomies that help them to make sense of the universe. As with Bourdieu's theory, these classifications are most often binary. Along these lines, Douglas contends that the maintenance of typologies or

and that part of the impetus for this movement was also to present a reconstructed black body for white valuation.

³⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 40. Cf. William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Touchtone, 1997).

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 43.

³⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50.

simple taxonomies is a way of ordering society and ranking relationships through differentiation.³⁹

The notion of *dirt* is related to such systems of classification in that whatever *dirt* represents as a variable class of symbols transverses such established categorization. In other words, what is seen as a pollutant and hence as *dangerous* in societies or social systems is that which does not fit fully into a genus, lies outside of a class, or in her words is ambiguous, anomalous,⁴⁰ marginal, or transitional.⁴¹ In short, “dirt is matter out of place.”⁴² She remarks in detail:

To conclude, if uncleanliness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanliness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular. The principle applies throughout.⁴³

³⁹ What Douglas appears to be saying is that knowledge is constructed through the apprehension of difference and the naming and categorization of such difference into binary taxonomies that bring coherence to an otherwise absurd and random universe.

⁴⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 49.

⁴¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 119-20.

⁴² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.

⁴³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50.

Cultural and social prohibitions and taboos function to trace the outlines or the exterior boundaries of the ideal social order.⁴⁴ Any transversals or violations of the cosmological schemes of this order or any of the classes are seen to threaten the order and the cosmology and as such are seen as *dangerous*.⁴⁵

Julia Kristeva extends Douglas in a helpful way here. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*,⁴⁶ using psychoanalysis as a primary tool of interpretation, examines the stuff that in Douglas's schema would be considered "*out-of-place*," again, those things which were seen as dangerous to the system because they were considered potentially contradictory or defiling and therefore subversive to the social order. Kristeva calls such potential pollutants and defilements *abject*.⁴⁷ That is, what is *abject* is loathed and viewed as unclean and improper in such a system and therefore cast off (i.e., *abjection*).⁴⁸ This *abjection* is a safeguard that protects the social order from an object that is perceived to be *dangerous*—that poses an ostensible threat of adulteration to the system.⁴⁹ The symbol system of the *abject* is semiotic in the sense that it is grounded in the body. Katie Cregan explains:

⁴⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 90.

⁴⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, xi.

⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1-4.

⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1-4.

⁴⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

The rejection is played out through *abjection*. Abjection is a semiotic (linguistic), but also an embodied, phenomenon. It is the rejection of and revulsion at what both is and is not the body. This largely centres on bodily wastes. . . . Blood, bile, phlegm, faeces, mucus, etc. are with this evidence of the body's boundaries both necessary and dangerous to the self-constituting subject. One must expel (abject) the waste and enter the clean and ordered symbolic state to function effectively as a social being. But at the same time, the abject hovers at the margins of life, never fully abolished: one bleeds, one is sick, one shits.⁵⁰

In this citation, Cregan reiterates and emphasizes the relationship that exists between the physical body and a given social system. She maintains that abjection is semiotic in the sense that, while its metaphors extend to social collectivities, the symbols of abjection—those things which are viewed as repulsive because they are the wasteful products of the body—nevertheless, have an ambivalent relationship with the body, since they *are* and at the same time *are not* the body. The notions of *abject* and *abjection* will assist me with the theoretical distinctions between those bodies (*out-of-place*, i.e., *abject*) which are expelled by the system and kept from returning to it because they are seen as the hated stuff that was ejected (*abjection*) and the black bodies (*in-place*) that are viewed as existing within the boundaries of the system in ways that do not damage it and put it at risk of corruption and pollution.

The “Ocular” Gaze and Fixed Identity: Black Bodies “*In-Place*”

⁵⁰ Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body*, 96.

Before one establishes what it means to be “*out of place*,” it is necessary to determine the function and meaning of being “*in-place*.” I suggest that it is this *in-place* body that concerned the NOI mostly. Here, I argue that black bodies “*in-place*” were bodies that were racialized and whose identities and meanings were viewed as fixed. These were not seen as politically active and confrontational bodies, but rather were bodies that “knew” their place and stayed in it. Black bodies could be perceived as socially *in-place* in that *physical bodies* stayed in defined but limited spheres of activity, which rendered them acceptable and innocuous. But they could also be symbolically *in-place* if they bought into and internalized *discourses* and *ideas* of black inferiority, obsequious and overly deferential *attitudes* toward whites, and any *intellectual* state or condition that made them complacent with their *in-placeness*. For these reasons, these bodies had, for the NOI, negative aesthetic dimensions; indeed, they were “ugly,” grotesque and in need of redemption and valorization. In short, they needed to be made beautiful. But how did black bodies become fixed and grotesque?

My contention here is that one of the primary ways⁵¹ that identities of black bodies were “fixed” *in-place* was through the white gaze that supersaturated it with

⁵¹ Lucius T. Outlaw. *On Race & Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), xii-xiii. “Education” as a field of practice was also a method that served to “fix” the relationship between black and white peoples as metaphysical. Therefore, education in America may have functioned, according to some critics, to stabilize and maintain the order of such relationships. In fact, Outlaw is explicit in his claim that education and social activity in his experience was meant to service white domination and black

multiple negative meanings vis-à-vis whiteness, not necessarily whiteness as a genotype or phenotype but instead existentially and epistemologically in the sense that it is lived, performed, and constructed as the binary opposite of blackness upon which it is dependent for its own meaning.⁵² Stated differently, this relational dimension, in which black bodies are constructed over against whiteness, constitutes, as George Yancy states

inferiority and to make it a permanent and fixed order. Put another way, education functioned to fix black bodies *in-place*. Outlaw remarks that he understands retrospectively that the education and the training that was available to his community were meant to reinforce and to inscribe the hegemonic social order onto black bodies. He interprets this order as hierarchical and naturalizing—that is, the discourses and practices were intended to give the impression that white supremacy and black inferiority were natural and universal (like Bourdieu’s notion of *doxa*). Hence, this form of symbolic violence would assist in the social reproduction of the order given that some would internalize it and others would not question it and therefore seek to disrupt it. In Outlaw’s case, however, “education,” as indoctrination, had the opposite effect. His mostly black teachers, church communities, family, and so on, instilled in him a deep sense of pride and commitment to *flourish* rather than just survive.

⁵² This is not to deny the relationship between phenotypical whiteness and whitely performance; it is only to suggest that there is no absolute correspondence between the two. One need not be “white” phenotypically to perform whitely. Also, this opposition is along the lines of a Manichean duality in which light/dark, good/evil, et al. correspond to white/black. See, Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 114-65.

it, a “semiotic field of axiological difference” in which whiteness itself is constructed as the transcendental signified⁵³ (i.e., the ideal) and the Universal Subject⁵⁴ (which allows it to operate through concealment). The gaze is an asymmetrical *Look* that communicates this taxonomic field of difference, saturated with stipulatory metaphors and the axiomatic givenness of philosophies and theologies that participated in normalizing and stabilizing white supremacy and black inferiority that dehumanize and construct black bodies as *other*.⁵⁵

Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist and revolutionary from Martinique, illustrates this poignantly in the famous aphorism in his text *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁵⁶ Fanon describes his experience in the gaze of a little white child accompanied by his mother, as one who *was gazed upon, looked at*:

‘Look, a Negro!’ It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by.

I made a tight smile. ‘Look, a Negro!’ It was true. It amused me. ‘Look, a Negro!’ The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ Frightened! Frightened! Now that they

⁵³ Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 3; cf. 88. In other words, whiteness remains the same across the field of difference as metaphysically given and fixed metaphysical essence in order to define what is different.

⁵⁴ Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism*, 4.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Leder, *The Absent Body*, 91-2.

⁵⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

were beginning to be afraid of me, I made up in my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter became impossible.⁵⁷

Fanon states that his “corporeal schema,” that is his self that was constructed through experience of the world, crumbled and was replaced instantaneously with a “racial epidermal schema” in which his black skin became the object marker for negative meanings, while he became alienated from his own body simultaneously. This classic yet acutely distressing example of the experience, effects and affects, of the gaze requires, indeed cries out for, further elucidation.

I would like to offer some interpretive observations and illustrations, but remind the reader that the various observations will overlap in places due to the interrelatedness of aspects of the gaze. First, the gaze is not simply a literal practice and an ocular metaphor for a colonizing look that is always already present in the constructions of white over and against black, it is also discursive. Note that along with the child’s “gaze” was also a linguistic pronouncement: “Look, a Negro!” In other words, discourse, discursive praxis, is indissociable from the gaze as the gaze is already based on the repertoire of its classifications.

Second, the gaze is epistemological in that it advances toward and all-around its referent, weighted down, energized, driven by desire for the other and historically constituted ideas and classifications. Fanon seemed to realize this when he commented: “I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history,

⁵⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111-2.

and above all *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers.”⁵⁸ Along this line, he hints at the affective and psychical weight that accompanies this noetic gaze: “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”⁵⁹

Third, the gaze intimates that the child in question had already been socialized into this system of relationships and fields of meaning (i.e., whiteness) at an early age. This is important for its social replication (like Bourdieu’s *bodily hexus*). It stands to reason that some if not most of this socialization operates unconsciously, since whiteness functions invisibly, surreptitiously, like being fish immersed in water (i.e., water=whiteness), it operates as a natural and cosmological, metaphysically fixed and pre-given, set of ordered cosmogonic relationships that posit the visible world in terms of white and non-white, with blackness representing absolute binary opposition.

Fourth, the gaze involves issues of space and place that will become apparent in our discussion of black bodies *out-of-place*. For now, suffice it to say that both notions are ambiguously defined and at times interchangeable. Generally, however, *space* is seen as an abstract category of experience of the world in three dimensions while *place* is space to which someone has laid claim. Fanon indicates, in another text, that after meeting a “white man’s eyes”⁶⁰ (i.e., an experience of the gaze) the composition of his

⁵⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112. Cf. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, 98.

⁵⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

⁶⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

self as a body was a temporal-spatial phenomenon,⁶¹ meaning that he became aware of his environment and conscious of his “*body*” coming into being at a particular place and time.

Fifth, the gaze renders black bodies spectacles. According to Fanon, expressed in the child’s mother’s remarks: “Look at how handsome that Negro is!...”⁶² The reference to his physiology, could have just as easily been, “Look at how compliant and kinesthetic *a body* he is.” This may correspond to the frequency and the comfort at which the dominant culture embraces black bodies that entertain through sports, cinema, and unfortunately buffoonery. But this *spectaclization* functions as an “*in-place*” in which African Americans are not seen as *dangerous* but rather acceptable for the sake of entertaining the “majority culture.” Charles Long comments:

So in any arena which the majority culture has deemed to be important, there would be no more than one or two of the minority group that would be capable of creativity or accomplishment—except in arenas which are pleasing for the majority group, for the sake of their entertainment, such as sports or popular music or something of that sort.⁶³

⁶¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

⁶² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.

⁶³ C. M. Jones and J. M. Hardy (Interviewers). “From Colonialism to Community: Religion and Culture in Charles H. Long’s *Significations*.” *Callaloo* 36 (1988): 584.

Again, being *seen* as having limited creativity and hence opportunities within a given culture is also an issue of life-limiting options that are related to fixed identity⁶⁴ and “*in-placeness*.” But such *spectaclization* of black bodies is what makes so readily available and permissible the imitation of African Americans in American media, popular culture, and entertainment—imitation that historically reflects prevailing negative depictions of African Americans as criminals, “gangstas,” buffoons, servants, and lascivious (male and female). The caricature of black bodies, some argue, also serves ideologically to justify certain political and criminal treatments and policies.⁶⁵ The point here is that such mimetic renditions of black bodies also serves to fix black bodies symbolically as pathological and constricted through performative gazes that are alleged representations of black bodily comportment, intonation, attire, hair, and lifestyle, which are often represented egregiously as authentic by those in the dominant group who commodify black bodies and benefit, in various ways, from such condescending imitation.

The sixth observation regarding the gaze is that not only does it serve to fix black identity and *place* concretely, it carries with it profound aesthetic implications. After Fanon’s experience in the child’s gaze, for instance, he spoke of the experience of his body becoming alien to him, unrecognizable, distorted:

⁶⁴ See, Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 73.

⁶⁵ For example, Amos Wilson. *Black-on-Black Violence: The Psychodynamics of Black Self-Annihilation in Service of White Domination* (New York: Afrikan World Infosystems, 1990).

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger...⁶⁶

Yancy refers to the experience of experiencing one's body as an-*other*, as something that is created in/by the gaze and thrown back to one as one's own, as "the phenomenological return of the black body."⁶⁷ By this "return," he means that the gaze constructs racialized black bodies, imbues them with historically constituted meanings that are grounded in Western ontology of black inferiority, so that the black body that appears to the consciousness of the receiver is a body that is unrecognizable, ugly, "dangerous,"⁶⁸ but considered a metaphysical reality. Yancy reflects on his contention:

⁶⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113-4. Cf. 110-1.

⁶⁷ Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 168. Cf. Long, *Significations*, 120-1; 180, 184.

⁶⁸ "Dangerous" is a term that Yancy uses to describe the black body, in fact, as always already dangerous or as universally dangerous. For me, this is a gross overstatement that I will contradict. While it is a compelling notion that may have some affective grounds, it seems more likely that rather than always already dangerous, the black body is most perceived as dangerous in the condition that it is seen as socially and symbolically *out-of-place*. Then and only then, it becomes a perceived threat to the social order. Cf. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 102. Gordon seems to agree with Yancy, holding that

The black body has been confiscated. My Black body has been confiscated. When followed by white security personnel as I walk through department stores, when a white sales person avoids touching my hand, when a white woman looks with suspicion as I enter the elevator, I feel that I have become this amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal, incapable of delayed gratification. Within the space of these social encounters, I become *other* to myself. I feel alienated from my own body.⁶⁹

Yancy indicates that the meaning of *the* black body as well as *his* Black body are not under the control of those who inhabit them. They are said to have been “confiscated.” They experience their bodies as secondary and as objects when they encounter white people in uncomfortable ways. For Fanon and Yancy, these moments were instances in

the black body “seen” makes it guilty of a prior offense: “His color is the evidence. He is guilty of blackness.” Note that for them both, the Sartrean maxim: “existence precedes our essence” does not hold, since the black body is always already determined prior to experience in the world. It is reversed: essence precedes existence. But also notice that in the allusion that Yancy makes above, one could easily interpret each instance as being perceived as *out-of-place* as the reason for the its perception as dangerous.

⁶⁹ Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 1.

which they became “black.”⁷⁰ They experienced their bodies as black (*object*) and as other, while their pre-alienation bodies (*subject*) went unseen.

This encounter of my-body-being-experienced-by-me constitutes a subject-object problem in that the body appears to me in my consciousness as *object*, a mass, an amputation, thrust upon me, that externalizes me from my own body. The black body becomes duplex, the dreaded bifurcation that Maurice Merleau-Ponty despised.⁷¹ The other is, hence, internalized, which means that whiteness is omnipresent, omniscient, always everywhere, always with me, *em-bodied*. W.E.B. Du Bois’ classic (1903) aphorism on double-consciousness illustrates this dramatically:

⁷⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113; Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 22.

⁷¹ M. C. Dillon. “Merleau-Ponty and the Reversibility Thesis.” *Man and World: Continental Philosophy Review* 16 (1983), 365; E. T. Gendlin. “The Primacy of the Body, Not the Primacy of Perception.” *Man and World* (1992), 345; Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 409; Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138-147, esp. 214-15; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Much of Merleau-Ponty’s work was establishing the body as playing the central role in phenomenology but also to combating subject-object dualisms (esp. that of Sartre) that were pervasive in the field.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a particular sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.⁷²

In fact, Du Bois's statement could have been used to illustrate numerous points that we have been arguing about the gaze, for example, that it is noetic, that it is internalized by the other, or that through it, one experiences self and other simultaneously, albeit self-consciousness is obscured by the presence of the colonizing other. Again, an important

⁷² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 2-3.

Originally published in 1905; Long, *Significations*, 120-1; 180, 184. Cf. 1n, where Long talks about the “second creation.” He also suggests that this “second creation” of African Americans is the source of Du Bois's double-consciousness.

facet of this duality is that it establishes whiteness as a presence, but one that is pervasive, even more present as an absence in which it is at the same time a transcendence.⁷³

Seventh, the gaze has an aesthetic dimension. Because blackness is viewed through and/or vis-à-vis whiteness black bodies are their opposite. Rather than pure, intelligent, restrained, and cultured, they are grotesque, unintelligent, hypersexual. Their form is dark, disfigured, disproportionate. Whiteness is the standard for beauty. Everything else pales in comparison, including and especially black bodies. No one articulates this idea more cogently and eloquently than Cornel West. In *Prophesy Deliverance!*, he explicates what he calls a “genealogy of modern racism”⁷⁴ in which he describes the development of white supremacy through Western philosophical discourse, the natural sciences, Greek ocular metaphors, and classical notions of beauty. All of these, West argues, came together to produce what he called a “normative gaze,” “an ideal from which to order and compare observations.

This ideal was drawn primarily from classical aesthetic values of beauty, proportion, and human form and classical cultural standards of moderation, self-control, and harmony.”⁷⁵ This normative gaze operates through concealment within the “scientific” principles of observation, evidence, and classification through which and in which it makes “value free” judgments about beauty. Elaborate human aesthetic

⁷³ Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, 98.

⁷⁴ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47-65.

⁷⁵ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 53-4.

taxonomies function to differentiate beauty in relation to the normative gaze, the universal norm (in which the ideal is blond hair and blue eyes). Like Bourdieu's *habitus*, this is an embodied aesthetic meant to communicate status through posture, physical features, attitudes, tastes, etc. In the end, Negroid status, features, habits, attitudes, and culture, in short, black bodies are in Fanon's and Elijah Muhammad's word "ugly"⁷⁶ and might I add, fixed.

Finally, it becomes obvious that the slave auction and lynching were performative gazes that functioned, as we have been arguing, to fix black identity ontologically and socially. These two historic processes, which Anthony Pinn calls the "rituals of reference," are critical to understanding the black body. The slave auction was a highly significant episode, indeed a communal and religious event in the sense that it reinforced white supremacy and the status of whites as *subjects*, in the ultimate sense of being the active participants and creators of history, even as it rendered black bodies as the *objects* of history. The slave auction—black bodies on display, looked at, seen, inspected, made to perform for crowds of white on lookers, objects for sale. The auction block stripped away prior perceptions of self for the individual and the slave community. This resulted in the experience of terror, a terror rooted in the inescapable fear that one's child, husband, wife, relative, or friend could be sold away, resulting in potentially insurmountable realities of separation and loss.

⁷⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113; Elijah Muhammad also used the word "ugly" to characterize the black body in relation to white culture. See, Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*. Book One (Chicago, IL: Muhammad's Temple of Islam #2, 1967), 103.

Lynching, which took the form of hangings, burnings, disarticulations, dismemberments, mutilations, and other methods of torture, was used as a form of social control that also fixed the black-body *in-place* in that it communicated the limitations of black social activity and the curtailment of life options. When the system was seen to have been violated (i.e., when a black body was deemed *out-of-place*), lynching reinscribed the hegemonic social order on black bodies as it reasserted and reaffirmed the maintenance of white supremacy, made necessary in the United States by the abolition of slavery and the institution of Reconstruction. Again, terror resulted, the terror of fixed identity. With the status quo and the “sacred” cosmological order⁷⁷ firmly reinforced through lynching, the white community could celebrate the social order through the aesthetic reproduction of the event. Proof positive of the gaze as a significant social and religious event for whites, many lynchings were documented through photography, depicting well-dressed crowds that included children, often smiling in front of hanging or charred bodies. Some of these photographs were widely circulated as postcards,⁷⁸ sent to family and friends throughout the United States, symbolically “fixing” black bodies and identities in ways that allowed for the celebration and continuous consumption of these

⁷⁷ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 77. According to Pinn, lynchings were mythological and religious events since they connected the participants to an assumed cosmic order that many lynchers believed God sanctioned and justified.

⁷⁸ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7-46. Note Apel’s chapter called “On Looking” referred to here.

mutilated bodies through voyeuristic gazes, symbolic anthropophagic practices that bell hooks calls “eating the other.”⁷⁹

Danger!: Black Bodies “*Out-of-Place*”

Black bodies *out-of-place* are apprehended and classified as *dangerous* in that they are perceived to have crossed symbolic (i.e., attitudinal, intellectual) and social (i.e., physical bodies crossing geographical) boundaries, categories of being and behavior, fixed classifications that maintained the social order. At this juncture, I argue with Yancy and Gordon who suggest that black bodies are always already dangerous.⁸⁰ Yancy

⁷⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21-39.

⁸⁰ I reiterate my contention here that black bodies are not universally seen as dangerous or stated differently that they are not always already dangerous. Using Douglas’s notion of dirt allows us to see that structuring and ordering protects the system in ways that renders black bodies innocuous so that while they are potentially dangerous due to their recalcitrance, their *in-placeness* renders them negated, abject, and antiseptic. Even in the example we offered of Fanon’s experience in and with the gaze of a white man and of a child, it is clear that Douglas’s interpretation of “matter out of place” applies, for what is viewed as dangerous is anything that is seen as anomalous and ambiguous with respect to a particular social order, which can be applied to Fanon in the earlier illustration (see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111-2), who speaks also of spatio-temporal dislocation (i.e., *out-of-placeness*) as his condition on the day he encountered the child—having

contends, “In addition to these economic and social realities, I continue to *live* my body in Black within a culture where Blackness is still over-determined by myths and presuppositions that fix my body as a site of danger.”⁸¹ To the contrary, Black bodies fixed *in-place* pose no threat to anyone in the dominant group, neither do they do damage to the established social order or cosmology. It is a property of fixing status and categorization to make the world intelligible that also renders the world logical, under control, safeguarded. It is only when matter, in this case the black body, is out of place that it becomes a potential pollutant and hence a *danger*—black bodies in the wrong neighborhood, driving cars that look too expensive, and so on.⁸²

crossed into the visual field of the child for whom Fanon’s presence was also anomalous, as indicated by his reaction, “Look. . .!” In addition, what also made Fanon appear dangerous, he suggests, is the difficulty with classifying him, since, according to Douglas, what is difficult to classify or is ambiguous with respect to classificatory systems is also viewed as out of place and hence as *dangerous*. Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 113), remarks, “Where am I to be classified? Or, if you prefer, tucked away?” The answer: *in-place*. In short, what I am suggesting is that even Fanon (*contra* Gordon and Yancy) can be read as opposed to an absolute and universalizing of black bodies as dangerous, but rather as dangerous under particular contextual circumstances.

⁸¹ Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 90. Cf. 3-4, 22; See, 51n of this chapter.

⁸² Radhika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xii. Mohanram interprets *placeness* as social

Earlier I suggested that space, generally conceived, refers to an abstract category of experience of the world in three dimensions, while place refers to space to which someone has laid claim. I want to extend that discussion very briefly by stating that space is empty until it is embodied. Only then does it become meaningful and become place. Likewise, space becomes racialized when black bodies are perceived to inhabit such “space” that is out of bounds according to social norms or established taxonomies. As a result, black bodies are then “matter out of place.” This is when they are seen as “*dangerous*,” when attitudes, behaviors, practices, transgress social and symbolic classification, when African Americans are perceived as “too smart for their own good,” as oppositional, or historically when they cross racial classifications in sexual behavior.

But only recalcitrant bodies can be *out-of-place* and therefore *dangerous*, not fixed bodies *in-place*. Again, *in-placeness* protects the symbolic and social order from

(including geographical and national) and symbolic, and she illustrates nicely the changing meaning of bodies once they have crossed such boundaries and categories. She argues, “Not only does a sense of place participate in the construction of a perception of physical identity, it is also central to the formation of racial identity. The category of ‘black body’ can come into being only when the [physical] body is perceived as being out of place, either from its natural environment or its national boundaries.” Though Mohanram uses “black body” as a symbol to signify “out-of-placeness” of any body, including her own South East Asian body, her usage of the symbol often slips, and I find that she is speaking frequently of literal “black” bodies as carrying negative meanings due to being out of place.

pollution, from danger. *In-placeness* keeps separate things and behaviors that would threaten the *status quo* even attitudes such as an “oppositional gaze,”⁸³ a counter-gaze in which an African American looks at whiteness suspiciously and with the intention to critique it. This is why, for instance, *in-place* black bodies historically could not look a white person in the eye but instead had to lower their heads in deference and submission. When the system has been perceived to have been violated, when something is viewed as being out of whack and a danger to the system, rituals such as lynching are enacted to restore order, homeostasis, “*in-placeness*.”

In the language of Julia Kristeva,⁸⁴ one can say that such bodies (*out-of-place*) are *abject*. That is, they are ejected and violently confronted (i.e., *abjection*)⁸⁵ in order to maintain their status as polluting and to prevent their reentry. What Fanon adds to this discussion of immeasurable value is the idea that protecting the social system for whites was a question of the erotic and in particular the homoerotic.⁸⁶ According to Fanon, black

⁸³ hooks, *Black Looks*, 115-31, albeit here hooks is speaking specifically about African American women as critical spectators of cinema and literature that depict representations black women, she also refers to the oppositional gaze of black slaves toward slave masters, etc.

⁸⁴ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁸⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1-4.

⁸⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 155-70.

people and especially black men are viewed “on the genital level”⁸⁷ in the racist *imago*—the mythology of the Negro.⁸⁸ Along these lines, Kristeva may be instructive, here, in that she suggests that the system gives excessive attention to the *abject* (*out-of-place*) entity because of a continuing desire for the object.⁸⁹ Therefore, keeping black bodies *in-place* can be seen as protecting whiteness or a particular white social order from symbolic or actual penetration or intrusion or the from self-realization of its attraction. Fanon remarks:

At the extreme, I should say that the Negro, because of his body, impedes the closing of the postural schema of the white man—at the point, naturally, at which the black man makes his entry into the phenomenal world of the white man.⁹⁰

Fanon suggests (as Kristeva might agree) that racism has an erotic charge in that the protecting the system is converted epistemologically⁹¹ to protection from sexual and

⁸⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 159.

⁸⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 159; cf. 150.

⁸⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

⁹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 160.

⁹¹ See, Stephen C. Finley. “Homoeroticism and the African American Heterosexual Male Quest for Meaning in the Black Church.” *Black Theology: An International Journal*. 5.3 (2007): 305-26. I argue elsewhere that a similar epistemological conversion occurs for black heterosexual men vis-à-vis Christianity and black churches, who translate the symbolic same-sex terms of their worship of a male God to actual terms of

symbolic entry by black people.⁹² For Fanon, this is the reason why black people were castrated in lynchings.⁹³ But again, while instructive here, Fanon misses the point that black bodies are not simply biological facts; they can be *out-of-place* symbolically, and this protrusion into the white world, Fanon suggests, is the origin of the problem—when a black [biological] body appears to a [white] body and performs supremely (i.e., perceived *out-of-placeness*), as in athletics,⁹⁴ in a realm that was viewed as white prior to such phenomenological appearances. Fanon concludes that whiteness or white bodies experience “destructuration,”⁹⁵ as a result, a disturbance or disruption in a psychic system of representation, a culture’s norms and meanings, which regulate it.⁹⁶

“homosexuality” and that this in part may help to explain the difficulty they face in finding meaning in churches.

⁹² Lewis R. Gordon. *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 235-50. For a related conversation, see perhaps Lewis Gordon’s most intriguing and intellectually sophisticated chapter, “Can Men Worship?: Reflections on Male Bodies in Bad Faith and a Theology of Authenticity.”

⁹³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 162.

⁹⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 160-1.

⁹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 161.

⁹⁶ William R. Stoeger, S.J. “Cultural Cosmology and the Impact of the Natural Sciences on Philosophy and Culture” In *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, 73-4 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

What the NOI thought was pitiful and ugly was this *in-place* black body that was constructed in slavery and oppression and the representation of it as slavish, buffoonish, docile, and submissive. The *in-place* body was the one that danced a jig, ate slave food under the guise of “soul food,” that was depicted as animalistic. Furthermore, *in-placeness*, for instance, was represented as black women who were perceived as always sexuality available to white men,⁹⁷ and as black men who were seen as hypersexual, unintelligent brutes.⁹⁸ As a consequence, the NOI sought to reconstitute such distorted black bodies socially and symbolically. According to Elijah Muhammad:

Beauty appearance is destroyed in us – not just our facial appearance, but the most beautiful appearance about us, our characteristics (the way we act and practice our way of life). We achieve one of the greatest beauties when we achieve the spiritual beauty and characteristics through practicing them. We achieve the spiritual beauty through practicing or carrying into practice the spiritual laws... We know that we have been made ugly by our enemies... by not practicing culture that would beautify [us].⁹⁹

Muhammad here also appeals to the categories of *in-placeness* and *out-of-placeness* as social and symbolic when he suggests that beauty is something that is physical (social) and spiritual and cultural (symbolic). The NOI was responding to this *in-place* body that they perceived was mangled and undesirable, but they wanted to re-imagine and re-

⁹⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 61-73.

⁹⁸ hooks, *Black Looks*, 87-107.

⁹⁹ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*. Book One, 102-3.

present an agential, resistant body that was black and beautiful (read: male, heterosexual, middle class, etc.), in short a black body *out-of-place*, indeed they were already on their way, as a brief survey of the history of the NOI will indicate.

Mapping the Black Body in the History of the Nation of Islam

Many studies of the Nation of Islam (NOI) begin with a discussion of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and its founder, Noble Drew Ali, because it was the first sustained “Islamic” movement among African Americans in the United States.¹⁰⁰ In

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Edward E. Curtis, IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*. 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994); Clifton E. Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Resurrection, Transformation, and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America, 1930-1995* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996); Vilbert L. White, *Inside the Nation of Islam: A Historical and Personal Testimony by a Black Muslim* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2001); Turner, Richard Brent, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003). See also, Stephen C. Finley and Torin D. Alexander. “In Search of the Promised Land: Post-Civil Rights Trends in African American Religion.” In *Faith In America: Changes, Challenges, and New Developments*, Vol. I, pp. 207-26. Edited by Charles Lippy (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 207-26.

addition, some scholars infer or explicitly assert a causal relationship between the NOI and its antecedent, the MTSA. This group was significant as an antecedent because of its esoteric and Masonic origins that suggest that black bodies initially were seen as private rather than public for the NOI. For Example, Clifton Marsh makes the connection between the two groups by linking Master Fard Muhammad, the founder of the NOI, to Noble Drew Ali, the founder of the MTSA:

During the summer of 1930, Master Fard Muhammad, often referred to as Professor Fard, appeared in the Paradise Valley community of Detroit, Michigan, claiming to be Noble Drew Ali reincarnated. Master Fard's mission was to gain freedom, justice, and equality for people of African descent residing in the United States. Master Fard proclaimed himself the leader of the Nation of Islam with remedies to cure problems in the African American community.¹⁰¹

Elsewhere Marsh makes the claim more directly, stating: "The Nation of Islam evolved from the Moorish Science Organization, founded by Timothy Drew."¹⁰² For these reasons, this study will likewise begin with a brief sketch of Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Marsh, *From Muslims to Black Muslims*, 37.

¹⁰² Marsh, *From Muslims to Black Muslims*, 29.

¹⁰³ Michael A. Gomez. *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Gomez actually argues that Islam in America, including the Moorish Science Temple, can be traced to slaves in

Born Timothy Drew in North Carolina in 1886, Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Temple of Science (later changed to Moorish Science Temple of America). The generally accepted place and year for the founding of the organization was Newark, New Jersey in 1913. Edward Curtis, conversely, questions this data and locates the founding of the group in Chicago in the early 1920s, due to the fact that the Holy Koran of the MTSA, the sacred text of the organization, was compiled from sources that were not available until the 1920s. Again, this text was esoteric and gnostic in orientation, indicating that as a source for the construction of black bodies, they were private and religious. In addition, the group was incorporated in Chicago, but not until 1928. According to Curtis, no extant external sources verify the genesis of the organization in Newark in the second decade of the twentieth-century.¹⁰⁴

Notwithstanding, having once been a Baptist minister, Ali had attempted to build a militant Black Baptist movement, but the movement was apparently unsuccessful and short lived, and perhaps the theology and practices of the later MSTa were viewed as being more appropriate for reconstituting black bodies that held mystical as opposed to mundane and “ordinary” meaning. According to MSTa hagiographic legends, Noble Drew Ali received the call to teach Islam to “Negroes” in the United States from the King of Morocco. Therefore, from the “origins” of the MTSA, Ali evidences a focus on “race,” in that his mission was specifically to Islamize black bodies. Accordingly, the

America, who were brought to America from north and west Africa via the transatlantic slave trade.

¹⁰⁴ Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 47-8.

king bestowed upon him the name “Noble Drew Ali.” The title here is telling, in that “Noble,” is a title that comes from Freemasonry, for example the official name of the “Shriners” is Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of the *Nobles* of the Mystic Shrine.¹⁰⁵ The second legend claims that Drew had to pass a test to prove that he was a prophet. The test required him to find his way out of a labyrinth in the pyramids of Egypt, a test which he apparently passed. Drew Ali died in 1929, either from police brutality or by the hands of those who were loyal to a rival within the organization.¹⁰⁶

Whether or not Master Fard, the founder of the NOI, was a member of the MSTA is a disputed point, but this has relevance to the sources that the later NOI would use to construct black bodies, such as Freemasonry.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, after Drew Ali’s death, those who believed Master Fard’s alleged claim to be the reincarnation of Drew Ali and followed him would later become the NOI in 1930, and those who followed John Givens-El, Drew Ali’s former chauffeur whom some within the MSTA theorized was a reincarnation of Drew Ali, became the present day MSTA.¹⁰⁸ Master Fard’s race or

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Three of this project for a discussion of the relationship to Freemasonry and its titles. Cf. <http://www.aeonms.org/phpBBCMS/index.php/> Accessed February 11, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Marsh, *From Muslims to Black Muslims*, 29-35.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Evanzz. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 67-9, 407. The evidence strongly suggests that he was a member of the MSTA. See Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁸ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 110; Marsh, *From Muslims to Black Muslims*, 35.

ethnicity was ambiguous, which created some problems for the NOI mythology as they viewed his body as the prototypical ideal “black” body (Chapter Three). Some thought he was Arab, since he claimed to have been born in Mecca on February 26, 1877. He also claimed to be of royal ancestry as a descendent of the tribe of “Kareish,” apparently the same tribe at the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Master Fard built a following in Detroit in 1930, and the burgeoning movement apparently attracted Elijah Muhammad, then Elijah Poole, to one of his religious services.¹⁰⁹

Elijah Muhammad was born to Willie and Marie Poole in Sanderville, Georgia on October 7, 1897.¹¹⁰ Like Timothy Drew, he was formerly a Baptist, and he became one of Fard’s star disciples. In 1932, however, he left Master Fard in Detroit in order to begin NOI Temple #2 in Chicago, Illinois, the location of the present international headquarters of the NOI. In 1933, authorities ordered Fard to leave Detroit, and he migrated to Temple #2 in Chicago, where he was again accosted by authorities and arrested. Fard, subsequently, withdrew from the movement and eventually disappeared. Muhammad began to teach his followers that Master Fard was God in person and that his disappearance was due to his ascension to the mothership, literally a space ship, from which he would dispense judgment and retribution on the Devil (Whites) at the end of the age. Henceforth, Muhammad assumed absolute authority in the NOI. This is important for black bodies in the sense that the Mothership would be later seen as a metaphor for

¹⁰⁹ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 69. Evanzz argues definitively that Muhammad was also a former member of the MSTA.

¹¹⁰ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 19-21.

black bodies,¹¹¹ and Fard's ascendancy to deification would also have profound implications for how black bodies are constructed in the NOI, given Fard's complexion, religion, and gender, etc. as the paradigmatic black body.¹¹²

The NOI experienced great growth under Elijah Muhammad's leadership, from 1933 through 1975, claiming as its member heavy-weight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan among other notable personalities, and much of this expansion in membership and popularity was due to the charisma and work of Malcolm X. A former street hustler and ex-convict, Malcolm's charismatic style, genius, and candor served him well as he rose through the ranks of the NOI and became "the number two man" in the organization. The reality may have been, however, that Malcolm X was becoming increasingly popular, both in the NOI and in the American media, and that the NOI was flourishing as a result. While Malcolm was totally loyal to Muhammad by most accounts, others in the NOI were perhaps jealous of his standing and his relationship with Muhammad. Some if not much of his success in the NOI as well as the envy of him may be attributed to how closely Malcolm approximated Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy, a complex of factors that were sacralized by Muhammad as the ideal religious and physical black body (see Chapters Three and Seven). Moreover, many of Malcolm's rivals seemingly instigated the division between the two of them, causing Mr. Muhammad to be suspicious of Malcolm, who was the most likely NOI minister to succeed Muhammad as the leader of the group. Rumors of Elijah Muhammad's alleged

¹¹¹ See Chapters Three and Six for a discussion of the Mothership.

¹¹² See Chapter Seven.

sexual indiscretions with numerous NOI secretaries and potential competition over women (see Chapter Seven) may have exacerbated the tension between the two. Such issues might also point to the ways in which gender was constructed in the Nation and how power relations between men were played out, at least in part, on the bodies of black women.

Notwithstanding, Malcolm's expulsion and secession from the NOI and his later assassination in 1965 would pave the way for an intense struggle for power as Elijah Muhammad grew in age. This battle for influence and position would culminate in 1975 when Muhammad died. Initially, Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Mohammed, would take over as the leader of the NOI, but almost immediately he sought to move the NOI toward the global community of "orthodox" Islam. Born Wallace D. Muhammad, Imam Warith D. Mohammed changed the name of the NOI to the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, signifying a movement away from the separatist religious and Black Nationalist program of the NOI. This also indicated that black bodies would not be the mystical and esoteric oriented bodies that are characteristic of enclavist organizations. Rather, these bodies would be constructed out of the rituals and theologies of Sunni Islam, with a strong emphasis on "race" as an attempt to valorize and give "culture" to bodies that had been maligned in the violent history of America. Imam Mohammed's loyalty to the NOI was suspect earlier, due to his excommunication for philosophical, theological, and ideological reasons.¹¹³ He had challenged his father's teachings vis-à-vis

¹¹³ Clifton E. Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 101.

Sunni Islam, and as such, questioned their authenticity as “Islamic.” He had returned to the NOI perhaps due to the threat of violence and retribution against prominent members who apostatized. Now, given the opportunity to lead the group, he wasted no time disbanding significant NOI organizations and rituals. For example, he dissolved the Fruit of Islam (FOI), the security auxiliary, and he discontinued prominent rituals like the dress codes in which the men of the NOI wore bowties. The FOI and the dress codes had been important means by which Muhammad sought to bring respectability to black bodies as he co-opted many of the values of black and white middle-class Americans (see Chapters Three and Seven).

In 1977, tension from conflicting perspectives had come to a boil, conflicts that had existed between Elijah Muhammad and his son Warith concerning the “true” nature of Islam. Previously, he had secretly confided in Malcolm X about his misgivings, but he had no power to institute any of his ideological convictions. Now that his father was dead, he had the freedom to move on his divergences and to deconstruct the theological foundations of the Nation. Factions that had existed in the NOI prior to the death of Muhammad erupted, which included Louis Farrakhan, claiming that Warith Deen Mohammed had strayed from the true teachings of his father, Elijah Muhammad. The result was the splintering of the movement in 1977 into more than three distinct and separate entities, each claiming the legacy of Elijah Muhammad (Chapter Six), and the effect would be, in part, the re-institutionalization of many of the doctrines and practices that Muhammad used in constructing ideal black bodies under Muhammad (Chapter Three). The primary Nations of Islam would be led by Silis Muhammad, John Muhammad, the brother of Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan, who, according to

Clifton Marsh, had been excommunicated from Warith Deen Muhammad's group, later called the American Muslim Mission but then called the World Community of Islam in the West.

Once he was excommunicated, Minister Abdul Haleem Farrakhan changed his name to Minister Louis Farrakhan. On November 15, 1977, at the Institute of Positive Education, Minister Louis Farrakhan in one of his first public addresses explains his excommunication from the WCIC.¹¹⁴

Some would argue that Farrakhan was pushed out of the movement through a process of demotions, and one could easily argue that he left on his own volition. Nevertheless, the NOI group lead by Farrakhan would be the movement that most would associate with the NOI, since it seemed to be the largest and most well known.¹¹⁵

Farrakhan's NOI is one that has itself undergone an evolution. First, Farrakhan reinstituted the Fruit of Islam and the dress codes and continued to build the NOI economically, and the group has been increasingly becoming middle-class and formally educated. Hence, black bodies, then, reflect Farrakhan's, and indeed Muhammad's later, concern for higher education (Chapter Six) and class mobility. Second, since the 1990s, the NOI has engaged in active conversation with Arabs and others of the world Sunni community. In fact, Moammar Qaddafi, the Libyan President, reportedly offered as much as a billion dollars to Louis Farrakhan and the NOI to start an independent bank for African Americans, which outraged the U. S. government. Such activities represent that

¹¹⁴ Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America*, 108.

¹¹⁵ Scholars have been unable to quantify its membership.

black bodies are recalcitrant and much more politically and publically engaged than in prior incarnations of the Nation. Furthermore, Farrakhan has traveled the world, meeting with such Arab leaders as Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Likewise, the trend since the 1980s has seen the NOI in conversation with other Muslims leaders globally. As Chapter Six notes, such activities are tied directly to Farrakhan's experience with a UFO in September 1985 that ultimately defines the significance of black bodies as transcendent and resistant and therefore not constrained by national ties and citizenship in terms of their cosmic meaning in the universe.

While Farrakhan and the NOI have become more global in their perspective, this has not guaranteed that the movement would gain mainstream or mass appeal. Sensing Farrakhan's liberal turn with respect to a measure of gender inclusiveness and Sunni Islam, the NOI under the leadership of Silis Muhammad and the United NOI of Kansas City, Missouri lead by Royall E. Jenkins, for instance, have taken a critical stance against Farrakhan, maintaining that he has distorted the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and that their movements represent a more pure adherence to his doctrine. Nonetheless, Farrakhan remains the leader of the most well known NOI movement to this day, and one could argue that his is the most recognizable in his popular influence on black consciousness and the ways in which race and gender are understood by African Americans.

Conclusion

As the aforementioned suggests, theological and ritual structures within the NOI changed throughout critical historical moments within the organization. What remained

consistent, however, was a certain type of theological and ritual attention to the human body. This is clearly evident in the writings of Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad's *How to Eat to Live*, Books One and Two,¹¹⁶ are invaluable texts that are explicitly concerned with the black body both as biological and as symbolic (Chapter Three). The rituals, such as mentioned above were exoteric practices that could be observed publically, and the discourses, to a large extent, were private and esoteric, in that one had to be an adherent of the religion to have access to sustained conversations regarding the true nature of the universe, the origin of the races and racism, and the eschatological implications of these teachings (Chapter Three). The exoteric practices and the esoteric principles indicate that the NOI was concerned both with the fitness, control, and longevity of physical bodies but also that they were just as focused on changing the negative meanings of black bodies as symbols of the social system and reconstituting them as the sights of ultimate knowledge and physical potency, which at the time, required connecting them to sources of meaning that transcended western sociopolitical and historical spaces. Such ritualization and discursive performance rendered black bodies in the NOI unrecognizable in historic discourses about the black race in America, and therefore, the dominant culture perceived NOI black bodies to be *dangerous*.

Yet, we should also take a moment here to revisit the notion of danger. Black Bodies *In-and-Out of Place*, disputes that black bodies are seen as “*dangerous*” *a priori*

¹¹⁶ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live* (Chicago, IL: Muhammad's Temple of Islam #2, 1967); Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book No. 2 (Atlanta, GA: MEMPS, 1972).

but rather are only deemed such as they traverse the dominant social classificatory system or fail to fit neatly into given taxonomic categories that are meant to govern their meaning and activity.¹¹⁷ This notion pushes back on explicit references to black bodies as always already dangerous in the works of Gordon,¹¹⁸ Yancy,¹¹⁹ Fanon, and others. Nowhere, however, is the notion of black bodies fixed as the personification of danger epitomized as in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. In fact, Fanon errs on two levels. To this end, he uses psychoanalytic categories to demonstrate the nature of black bodies vis-à-vis the pathology of racism.¹²⁰ In the first instance, he suggests that black bodies are "phobogenic,"¹²¹ more specifically, "The Negro is a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety."¹²² The issue with such a declaration is that the origin of anxiety, fear, and indeed, *danger* is placed on the "object," or black bodies. Fanon, here, in his use of psychoanalytic language, acquiesces to and contributes to the stabilization of the notion that black bodies are dangerous *a priori* or always already, albeit this is not mean to imply that he agreed with the concept. In fairness, Fanon may have been making therapeutic observations that he believed were scientific as viewed by the sufferers of

¹¹⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44, 49; 119-20.

¹¹⁸ Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, 102.

¹¹⁹ Yancy, *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body*, 90. Cf. 3-4, 22

¹²⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 150-70.

¹²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 155.

¹²² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 151.

psychopathology, but it is not altogether clear that he dislodges this notion through sustained critique.

In the second instance, Fanon makes a mistake when he concedes that black bodies are attacked strictly based on their physical embodiment, what he calls the “corporeality”¹²³ of black people, whereas Jews are “persecuted” symbolically in an attack. For instance he says, “every time that a Jew is persecuted, it is the whole race that is persecuted in his person.”¹²⁴ At odds, here, is his contention that in the white imaginary the “Negro” is only a threat biologically, only bodily, while Jews are seen as “intellectual”¹²⁵ or symbolic “danger[s].”¹²⁶ He reports erroneously, “To suffer from a phobia of Negroes is to be afraid of the biological. For the Negro is only biological. The Negroes are animals. They go about naked. And God only knows.”¹²⁷ In the same sense, black bodies are not always seen as mere materiality, biochemistry, or physicality.

What Fanon misses in his conclusion is that the system reacts violently to black bodies that are symbolically *out-of-place* as well, and in the NOI we have a perfect illustration of this, given the violent responses to their mythology and intellectual critiques of American culture and government, while they were rarely, if ever, socially or biologically *out-of-place*. His own words seem a contradiction, for he says, in response to

¹²³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 163.

¹²⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 163.

¹²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.

¹²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.

¹²⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.

being gazed upon: “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”¹²⁸ That is to say, he was symbolically made to represent his entire race. In similar manner, the NOI was seen as *dangerous* for symbolic reasons, not simply social (biological) ones that involved the activity of their physical bodies. In other words, they were enclavists, who rarely, if ever, interacted with whites in politically or violently confrontational ways. It was the intellectual and discursive aspects of NOI praxis—eminently the symbolic—that made the NOI *dangerous* for so many people, for their mythology (Chapter Two) threatened the axiomatic givenness of philosophies and theologies that participated in normalizing and stabilizing white supremacy and black inferiority.

¹²⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

Chapter Two

Elijah Muhammad, Yakub, and the Critique of “Whitenized” Black Bodies: Black Bodies *In-Place* as Antithetical to the Divine Nature

Chapter One explored complex notions of embodiment, including an understanding of the body as physical and symbolic, that frame this study. Furthermore, it offered a way of viewing the black body, “black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*,” using Mary Douglas’s notion of “dirt,” that is the guiding theory of this project. The idea suggests that the NOI was responding to black bodies *in-place*, bodies that they saw as constricted, distorted, and fixed by a racist social system and cosmology as inferior. By contrast, black bodies *out-of-place* were seen as *dangerous* because they crossed defined social and symbolic categories of behavior.

James Cone, for instance, describes his upbringing in rural Arkansas as one that was grounded on the maintenance of black bodily *in-placeness*.¹ He describes the presumed *in-placeness*:

They [i.e., whites in his community] tried to make us believe that God created black people to be white people’s servants. We blacks, therefore, were *expected* to enjoy plowing their fields, cleaning their houses, mowing their lawns, and working in their sawmills. And when we showed displeasure with our so-called

¹ James H. Cone. *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

elected and inferior status, they called us “uppity niggers” and quickly attempted to put us in our ‘place.’²

What Cone illustrates is the contention made by Chapter One that the treatment of black bodies in the U.S. has historically been predicated upon a cosmology that saw them as inferior and servile and a social order that instituted and maintained such a presumption through the restriction of the activities of black bodies. So long as African Americans were perceived to be *in-place*, the oppressive social system was stabilized. When they were perceived to be *out-of-place* symbolically (e.g., seen as having an “uppity” attitude) or socially (e.g., refusing to perform obsequious physical duties), they were viewed by some as *dangerous*. Finally, Chapter One concludes by tracing moments in the history of the NOI that point to the importance and centrality of the body, especially in the four critical moments that are characterized by the lives and ministries of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan.

Chapter Two is an exploration of Elijah Muhammad’s theological and discursive assault on black bodies *in-place*. The chapter suggests that Muhammad’s views of such bodies was conditioned by the excessive violence and lynchings of black bodies that he witnessed and which were otherwise part of the everyday reality of African Americans in the southern United States especially in Georgia, the location of Muhammad’s birth. Furthermore, after joining the NOI and becoming its leader, the myth of Yakub, the main theological and cosmological narrative that gave coherence to his world and helped to explain the violence directed at black bodies, also informed his perspective of

² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 2.

black bodies *in-place*. Subsequently, this mythology shaped his critique of such “whitenized” black bodies. These black bodies were, as described in the Yakub narrative, were aesthetically disfigured, psychologically infirmed, and religiously demonic. Such was the disposition of bodies that had been fixed in place by white supremacy or in the language of the NOI—by the devil and his tricks. Chapter Two will recapitulate NOI mythology and demonstrate its connection to his critique of black bodies *in-place*.

For Muhammad, the epitome of such “inferior” bodies was African American Christians. These bodies had been made ideologically “white” because of their acceptance of the religion that was used by whites to make black people slaves and to fix the servile relationship to whites as divinely ordered and enduring.³ “So-called Negroes”⁴ who embodied this reality were odious to Muhammad due to their perceived complicity with the devil and *his* white social and religious systems. Although for Muhammad,

³ Hence, it is implied, here, that Muhammad privileged the symbolic over the social and that negative meanings attached to black bodies (symbolic) were more significant to him than physical bodies directly engaging in and challenging structures of oppression (social). Chapter Three will make this contention explicit.

⁴ See, Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1965), 34-5. Muhammad uses the term “*So-Called* Negroes” often in his writings as a rhetorical device to call into question the appropriateness of the name Negro, which for him, was a slave nomenclature.

many people in black communities had been tricked by the devil,⁵ no class of African Americans represented this caricature more than African American male Christian preachers, especially those of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. He contends:

Yet there are some leaders so ignorant and so in love and fear of the white man that they preaches [*sic*] the doctrine of equal brotherhood. They want brotherhood with their enemy before they ask for brotherhood with their own kind. Old preachers, Christian, so called Christian church preachers, black preachers, preaching such doctrine that we are all brothers, classifying himself and his followers with being the brother of the devil and the lovers and admirers, worshipers of real devils, their slave masters, regardless to what evil their slave masters do to them they fear to charge him with it, they fear to go from it, *they*

⁵ Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 350. Perhaps these people were the eighty-five percent of the black community that were considered easily led, like cattle, according to Master Fard Muhammad, the NOI founder, and the black Christian preachers were the ten percent who were "Uncle Toms." The remaining five percent were the intellectual advanced. Fard maintained that they were like gods on earth, and their duty was to rescue and liberate the ninety-five percent who were lost.

*fear to ask for a place other than the place that the slave master prepare [sic] for them: that's a place of torment, worry, grief, and sorrow.*⁶

For Muhammad, these African Americans (Christians and preachers) desired to linger in the abyss of abjection, that is, in the oppressive and constrictive social and symbolic “places” to which they were relegated, rather than to transverse, in mentally and physically liberating ways, the boundaries that rendered them subservient and despondent. The citation also indicates Muhammad’s awareness that the social order functions to relegate black bodies to *in-placeness*, and for him, to be *in-place* meant that black people would experience torment and grief. Accordingly, these were bodies that had acquiesced and indeed cloaked themselves in the dehumanizing conditions and ideologies of whiteness, especially Christianity. While Muhammad’s critique of these “whitenized” black bodies was rooted in the NOI’s mythical saga of Yakub, which functioned to make sense of an absurd world and an even more illogical black existence that was characterized by hostility from without, the mythology was given epistemological legitimacy and coherence by prior experiences of a physical and symbolic violence that was all-encompassing and seemingly omnipresent in Muhammad’s life.

Cosmology and the “Original Man”⁷: The Yakub Myth and

⁶Elijah Muhammad, *The Science of Time: The Time & Judgment when Self Tells the Truth on Self* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS, 1993), 27. Emphasis is mine.

⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, 31.

Anthropological Reversal

Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah and the “absolute” leader of the NOI after the “disappearance” of Master Fard Muhammad in 1933, was vociferously opposed to black bodies that he interpreted as being *in-place* symbolically, in the sense that such bodies were grotesque and antithetical to their divine nature as seen in narrative and metaphysical account of the history and origins of the world that are given expression in the story of Yakub. Perhaps due to the omnipresence of violence, which gave rise to a sense of terror, the mythology of Yakub became foundational⁸ as a basis

⁸ Albeit, most of the extant published literature on the NOI and the life of Elijah Muhammad was available over and covers the last two decades of his life (d. 1975), much of it does not examine his role as the leader of the NOI in relationship to his life as a means of making sense of the violence he witnessed and why the NOI and hence its mythology was attractive to him, that is, how the mythology functioned. See, for example, the first of the seminal texts on the NOI, authored by C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994), initially published in 1961 and E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). Prior to this, the first academic publication, completed almost solely based upon interviews with members, was written in 1937 and published in 1938 by Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 43.6 (May 1938): 894-907, gives only scant attention to Muhammad’s life. Cf. Claude Andrew Clegg, III, *An*

for critiquing black bodies that had been whitenized, that is, bodies that Muhammad perceived were *in-place* and functioning ideologically in service of the maintenance of white domination.⁹ Elijah Muhammad apprehended the experience of violence as part of the existential fact of blackness. It was unavoidable, inevitable, ubiquitous—at least if encounters between white people and black people defined the parameters of his existence. Such a comprehensive and systematic conception of such a world as brutal may affect objects of aggression in devastating ways, in that, like Muhammad, the

Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 345-9, who includes a bibliography of sources on Muhammad and the NOI.

⁹ Cf. Amos N. Wilson, *Black-on-Black Violence: The Psychodynamics of Black Self-Annihilation in Service of White Domination* (New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1991). Here, similar to Elijah Muhammad, Wilson argues that much of the violence in African American communities can be attributed to discourses and policies that become self-fulfilling and self-justifying and that the subsequent self-annihilation maintains black subjugation. The point here is that Wilson links much of the perpetuation of violence in black communities to black bodies that, like Muhammad suggests, had bought into the ideologies of black inferiority and hence were functioning in violent and self-annihilating ways that maintained the racist social system. In other words, these black bodies were symbolically *in-place* and therefore were acting in service of their own subjugation by committing violent acts against their own communities. For Muhammad, when bodies were ideologically (i.e., symbolically) “whitenized,” they can only act against their own communities and sabotage their own freedom.

possibility of violence becomes a necessary everyday consideration in one's life choices. Likewise, Iris Young suggests:

Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group. Any woman, for example, has a reason to fear rape. Regardless of what a Black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality and powerlessness, he lives knowing he is subject to attack or harassment. The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy.¹⁰

Muhammad would become accustomed to such ever-present terror and the threat of violence. His life, from his earliest years as a child to his later days as a religious leader, reflect the consciousness of the existential immanence of violence—lurking, destined to make itself felt and known at any moment. Young suggests that this reality of violence is

¹⁰ Iris Young, "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Oppression, Privilege, & Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism*, edited by Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 57.

a consciousness that is experienced by everyone in the community who shares a given object marker that is subject to regulation and brutality because of it.¹¹

As the grandson of slaves and the great grandson of a slave master,¹² Muhammad had been profoundly influenced and emotionally scarred by the violent terror that he experienced growing up and as a young adult in Georgia. Journalist Karl Evanzz suggests that this was the most violent and aggressive period of lynching for African Americans. He maintains, for instance, that one-third of all lynchings that occurred since 1882 were carried out between 1890 and 1900.¹³ During the year of Muhammad's birth, 1897, at least one hundred twenty-three African Americans had been lynched.¹⁴ Three weeks after Muhammad was born, Georgia Governor, W. Y. Atkinson, spoke of such lynching as necessary due to the rise in the African American population in the state—a necessary occurrence to protect the virtue of white women.¹⁵ On numerous occasions, he witnessed

¹¹ See, Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 77. Pinn calls this consciousness and ever-present fear, terror.

¹² Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1993), 26-7. According to Muhammad in this 1964 interview, his maternal great grandfather was a slave master.

¹³ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 19.

¹⁴ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 20.

¹⁵ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 20.

evidence or heard of local lynchings of African Americans in his hometown of Cordele, Georgia and in nearby towns.¹⁶

As a child (somewhere between 1903 and 1905), for example, he ventured into town at which time a white man opened his hand and showed him the ear of a black man, apparently one of several lynching trophies that the man possessed.¹⁷ In 1907, a large crowd of whites lynched a black youth, who was accused of raping a young white girl. Muhammad (then Elijah Poole) gazed in astonishment as the adolescent body dangled from a tree branch, “He cried for the dead youth and the rest of the blacks in Cordele, who in his view, allowed the killing to take place.”¹⁸ These highly-visible lynchings occurred with minimal threat of consequences, legal or otherwise, because of the important role they played in maintaining the status quo, so it is little wonder that they happened so often and that African Americans very seldom acted to protect themselves.¹⁹ Not only was the lynching itself detrimental to Muhammad’s sense of safety and well being, the fact that black people appeared helpless was traumatic as well.²⁰

¹⁶ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 10.

¹⁷ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 23-4; Clegg, *An Original Man*, 10.

¹⁸ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 10.

¹⁹ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 74-5.

²⁰ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 10. Clegg suggests that Elijah was traumatized by the inactivity of black people in response to lynchings: “Though a most savage object lesson, Elijah could not understand how this could have happened to a young man ‘in the midst

But perhaps the greatest trauma for Muhammad of many symbolic and actual violent events of his childhood was the lynching of his close friend and neighbor Albert Hamilton in 1912. Hamilton had been “identified” as the “big burly Negro” who had attacked a young white girl.²¹ After having been arrested and jailed at the Crisp County jail, where three black men had been lynched a week earlier, a white mob overran the facility, and as an example to other black people, dragged Hamilton out and through the black section of Cordele called “Negro town,” shot him more than three hundred times, hung him, and took photographs of the lynching, from which they made and sold hundreds of postcards in nearby towns.²² This event so traumatized young Elijah that he reported, “I cried all the way home,” and promised, “If I ever got to be a man, I told myself, I would find a way to avenge him and my people.”²³ Such a sentiment brought on by the traumatic events of his life may help to explain his later attraction to the drama of Yakub. Clegg remarks: “This traumatic experience stayed with Elijah for the rest of his life and certainly made him more susceptible to black separatist doctrines.”²⁴

These horrendous events were not the only appalling episodes of his youth. More than a decade later in 1917, he would meet Clara Belle Evans at a Cordele dance. They

of his own people’ while ‘all our grown men right there in the section’ watched and dare not intervene.”

²¹ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 39.

²² Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 39-40. Cf. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 75.

²³ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 40.

²⁴ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 10.

married roughly two years after that, the same year as infamous “Red Summer” in which more African Americans had been lynched in eight months than in any full year of the preceding decade,²⁵ including the lynchings of several black men and the burning of several black churches and lodges in nearby Millen and Milan, Georgia, and hundreds of mob killings and lynchings all over the country.²⁶ In order to escape violence and terror and for safety reasons, Elijah and Clara moved to Macon, Georgia in mid-September, mistakenly thinking it to be less violent than Cordele.²⁷

Unfortunately, leaving Cordele did not ameliorate their insecurities and fear, since killing and lynching was prevalent in Macon as well. Adding insult to injury, Elijah learned of another lynching in the vicinity of Macon on October 7, 1919. On what should have been a joyous celebration of Elijah’s twenty-second birthday, a mob kidnapped black prisoner, Eugene Hamilton, from police custody and shot him.²⁸ Elijah and Clara had moved to Macon in an attempt to find a peaceful existence, free from the fear of violence, and it appeared that violence followed them, was waiting for them, or both. In their experience, violence was omnipresent and seemingly inescapable:

The lynching dispelled any notion of security that Elija[h] had taken from the ‘safety in numbers’ axiom that prompted him to leave Cordele. There was no black community in Georgia large enough to insulate them against the

²⁵ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 41-3.

²⁶ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 46.

²⁷ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 47.

²⁸ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 39.

likelihood of lynching: The day before Eugene Hamilton was murdered two black men were burned alive in Augusta and on Sunday, October 5, another black man was lynched near Sandersville²⁹—four racially motivated murders in the state in three days.³⁰

The Poole's had left Cordele for Macon because they believed the large population of African Americans there would insulate them from the racial violence they were attempting to escape. As a result, in April 1923, Elijah left his family in Georgia, seeking greater social and economic possibilities for them in Detroit, Michigan.³¹ After several months, he had saved enough money to send for his family, but they soon learned that poverty, urban ghettos, and racial violence was as bad as anything they had seen in Georgia. In fact, the Ku Klux Klan and other white "terrorist" organizations were as large and at least as powerful and influential as they were in South.³²

The aforementioned is but an attenuated account of the lynching and violence that Muhammad experienced in his life, not to mention the violent discourse of black inferiority that would have existed anywhere in the country, but his experience as the grandson of slaves and a witness to lynching continued to function as a hermeneutic of social ("race") relations throughout his life. A speech delivered in the mid-1960s, for instance, illustrates this contention:

²⁹ Elijah (Poole) Muhammad's place of birth.

³⁰ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 47.

³¹ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 51.

³² Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 54-5.

This is the American so-called Negro: Robbed so complete today that even after reading the history of how their fathers were brought here, put on the block and sailed [*sic*] off as animals, and have been lynched and burned to the stake for every century since he has been here. And today he is being beaten and killed, shot down on the streets and on the highways throughout the government of America without hinderance [*sic*] by his slave masters children.³³

Muhammad suggests that American experience has stripped away any humanity and dignity from African Americans. Their history is characterized by slavery and lynching, he declares, and even beyond those practices, he intimates that the ethos of American culture promotes violence against black bodies, or at least it does nothing to curtail it. Furthermore, this manner of interpreting the world is what made the myth of Yakub so compelling and at the same time so necessary, given that it offered an explanation for the social order, for racial violence, and ultimately for the subjugation of black people in America.

To that end, the saga of Yakub is a complex, sometimes conflicting and confusing, narrative that underlies the philosophy and theology of Elijah Muhammad and attempts to explain the origins of the races and the reality behind why African Americans had suffered the transatlantic middle passage, slavery, lynching, and oppression at the hands of whites.³⁴ The saga purports to explain the problem of evil in light that God was

³³ Muhammad, *The Science of Time*, 26-7.

³⁴ The myth of Yakub was a significant development in black religious thought, although unwelcome by many in black religious communities, because it gave coherence to black

good and on the side of the NOI, God's chosen and "original" people. In short, the theodical narrative reversed common conceptions of race relations that suggested that black people were inferior to white people and that the hierarchical relationship between the groups was a metaphysically fixed ontology that was sanctioned by God.³⁵ For Muhammad, the answer was simple: white people behaved in a racially aggressive manner because it was their (metaphysically) fixed nature (i.e., ontological), as "made,"

suffering where Christian theological apologies had failed. For a detailed discussion of the inadequacies of black theological responses to the problem of evil, see William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973) and Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995). The Yakub Myth, however, still maintains some of the same theological problems as found in both Jones's and Pinn's critique, but particularly Pinn's, given that God is still seen as good, which is methodological problem that does not let the NOI deal adequately respond to the theodical problem. Furthermore, a response to evil has to be able [at least] to bracket the existence of God as a possible solution to the problem of evil and suffering.

³⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 83-5. Cone suggests that the perspective of viewing white humanity as the universal norm and ideal in theology deprives African Americans of their humanity. He describes this practice as another form of lynching. See also, Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 77.

not “created” beings—effectively reversing centuries of racial discourse and theological anthropology that rendered black bodies divinely inferior.³⁶

The story of Yakub has many multiple sources in the primary documents that reflect Muhammad’s speeches, newspaper articles, sermons, and radio addresses.³⁷ While

³⁶ Thomas F. Gossett. *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 178-85; Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 42, 54, 78, 101-22.

³⁷ Esp., Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy: For Speeches* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1971), 42-60; Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, 100-34. See also, for example, Elijah Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam* (Chicago: Muhammad’s Temple No. 2, 1983); Elijah Muhammad, *Birth of a Savior* (Chicago: The Coalition for the Remembrance of Elijah, 1993); Elijah Muhammad, *The History of Jesus’ Birth, Death and What It Means. . .* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 1993); Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam*; Elijah Muhammad, *The Science of Time*; Elijah Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 1994); Elijah Muhammad, *I Am the Last Messenger of Allah* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 1997); Elijah Muhammad, *The Tricknology of the Enemy* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 1997); Elijah Muhammad, *The True History of Master Fard Muhammad* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 2002); Elijah Muhammad, *Yakub: The Father of Man-Kind* (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 2002); Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes’s Problem*, vol. 1

the myth claims to be a history of the entire universe, which includes the self-creation of God seventy-six trillion years ago, the story is roughly organized around three periods. The first entails events that happened sixty-six trillion years ago, involving a plot to destroy the Original people of the earth. The second represents fifty thousand years ago when the remnant of the Original people lived in the Nile Valley, and the third, with the creation of the white race, six thousand years ago.³⁸ That said, Muhammad locates the genesis of the epic with the appearance of Master Fard Muhammad, Allah-in-person, the Great Mahdi and founder of the NOI, in 1930:

Allah came to us from the Holy City Mecca, Arabia in 1930. He used the name Wallace D. Fard, often signing it W. D. Fard. In the third year (1933), He signed his name W. F. Muhammad which stands for Wallace Fard Muhammad. He came alone. He began teaching us the knowledge of ourselves, of God and the devil, of the measurement of the earth, of other planets, and of the civilizations of some of the planets other than the earth.³⁹

(Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, n.d.; Elijah Muhammad, *Our Savior Has Arrived* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, n. d.). See also, Clegg, *An Original Man*, 41-67; Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 120-7. The fact that the story of Yakub had no singular source suggests that acolytes had to be disciple for an indeterminate period of time before they would have gained a full sense of NOI mythology.

³⁸ Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two (Atlanta, GA: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 2006), 2.

³⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 16-17.

The account that Master Fard Muhammad would transmit to Elijah Muhammad for the three years in which Elijah learned from Master Fard—part history, science, cosmology, numerology, and theological anthropology—would transform his reality and give it a coherence and consciousness that the unlettered man had never before experienced. The world was no longer absurd, and the racial violence and oppression made perfect sense, now that he understood “Mr. Yakub.”

In Muhammad’s mind, it was simple: Allah, who came to him in the person of Master Fard Muhammad, in a rather mundane and ordinary way gave to him the secrets of the universe, “He gave the exact birth of the white race, the name of their God who made them (i.e., Yakub) and how; and the end of their time; the judgment, how it will begin and end.”⁴⁰ Allah told him (i.e., in face to face conversations) the secret of how African Americans were made slaves and kept slaves through Christianity, and how America would meet its doom.⁴¹ Muhammad had absolute certainty regarding the truth because it had been given to him by Fard, who revealed that he was God. Muhammad said that he asked Fard, “Who are you?” Fard replied, “I am the one the world had been expecting for the past 2,000 years. . .My name is Mahdi; I am God.”⁴² As a consequence, Muhammad had access to the mysteries of the universe—all of which are woven together in the elaborate narrative of Yakub.

⁴⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 17.

⁴¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 17.

⁴² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 17.

According to the narrative, the literal and scientific history of African Americans, the “so-called American Negro,” goes back roughly seventy-six trillion years, when the universe was filled with darkness and lacked materiality and temporality, because nothing moved.⁴³ This was prior to the invention of writing, so not much is known about it, except that the only existence other than the void of the darkness was an atom, Muhammad insists. Elijah Muhammad avoids nagging questions of scientific cosmology such as the origin of the atom, which will become significant given that for him Allah (God) created everything:

Take your magnifying glass and start looking at these little atoms out here in front of you. You see that they are egg-shaped and they are oblong. You can crack them open and you will find everything in them that you find out here. Then were there some of them (atoms) out here? Well who created them? I want you to accept the Black God. You say, ‘There is no beginning or ending.’ I admit that. But we do know that they had to have some kind of beginning. But how it happened, we don’t know. That’s why we say that His Beginning, we don’t know anything about.⁴⁴

⁴³ Muhammad, *Yakub*, 48; Clegg, *An Original Man*, 41.

⁴⁴ Muhammad, *Our Saviour Has Arrived*, 39. This question of the origin of atoms was the same question that physicists like Fred Hoyle were asking and whose reply was similar. Hoyle was a proponent of the “Steady State” theory of the universe (a refutation of the “Big Bang”), which he called the “continuous creation” that at least temporarily solved the problem of original atoms in that for him, matter always existed and was continuously

Time began when this atom began to move,⁴⁵ and the atom developed flesh, blood, brains, and power.⁴⁶ This was the “beginning” of God, Allah, who was self-created and then set his⁴⁷ attention on creating other gods. These other “gods,” Muhammad, suggests, were the Original black people,⁴⁸ but he fails to explain why they were called such.⁴⁹

being created, which meant that he did not have to explain the origin of the atom. See, Fred Hoyle, *The Nature of the Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960); See also, Muhammad, *Birth of a Saviour*, 51, in which he discusses and wrestles with creation *ex nihilo*. Of course, some of the versions are contradictory in that Muhammad suggests that no matter existed, while others suggest that one atom existed. See, Muhammad, *Theology of Time*, 284.

⁴⁵ Muhammad, *Birth of a Saviour*, 51, 56. Muhammad, *Theology of Time*, 121; Muhammad, *Yakub*, 48. Time equals motion.

⁴⁶ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 42.

⁴⁷ God was male.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 42.

⁴⁹ One could conjecture, as the original people and as the created beings of God, God’s creation would also be gods. It also stands to reason that by using this term (and the word “original”) that Muhammad was attempting to link African Americans with beings on other planets. He could have also been attempting to counter discourses about black people that rendered them inferior (See Chapter One). By calling them “gods,” he may mean to imply their superiority or at least that they were not inferior.

After completing those tasks, God created the cosmos—an elaborate cosmogony that included a seven-planet solar system, each of which sustained animate life forms such as gods (i.e., people). The original gods lived on planet earth, which at the time, consisted of what later became the earth and the moon. Ruled from “Asia,” Earth was the homeland of the thirteen tribes into which Allah organized them, “united by skin color (black), religion (Islam), and disposition (righteous).”⁵⁰ Of the other planets, Mars was by far the most significant, and the gods who lived there, while less intelligent than the beings of earth, were believed to live as long as twelve hundred years, although most lived two hundred years. About this planet and its inhabitants, Muhammad had much to say, for example:

God taught me that He has pictures of the Martian people, and the devil believes it, because they have come so near to looking at the surface of Mars to look for creatures on it. They believe that they are there. They [i.e., the beings on Mars]⁵¹ are very wise, very skillful, so Allah taught me. They hear his planes coming. They could hide away. They live on that planet 1000 [*sic*] of our Earth years, so he may have seen a plane from the Earth yesterday. If they don’t want to be seen by you, they don’t have to let you see them. That’s the truth. You have people

⁵⁰ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 42.

⁵¹ Emphasis is mine.

on Mars! Think how great you are. Ask the white man if he has any out there.

We have life on other planets, but he don't."⁵²

This cosmological theme will have relevance elsewhere in this project in the sense that extending black life beyond the United States and indeed the planet Earth has aesthetic implications for black bodies (see Chapter Three). These were bodies that were not wholly defined by earthbound racist discourses and by implication were the sites of ultimate reality in the universe. Mars seems important because these are the black people who lived the longest and grew the largest. They may have represented how robust black bodies could be physically. But Muhammad also declares that white people are aware of black life on Mars, and that such life indicates that black bodies are superior, given that whites are limited to earthly existence and black people are interstellar.

Related to this idea of interplanetary black existence, Claude Andrew Clegg, III suggests that Master Fard Muhammad, in constructing this astrobiological aspect of the mythology, capitalized on fantasies and fears that circulated in the early twentieth century regarding life in the cosmos and on Mars and by the development of aviation. He argues that the former was a theme promulgated by American cinema, itself a developing art form:

Sporadic reports of UFO sightings and the advent of the airplane fueled interest in Mars and inspired a panoply of motion pictures including *A Trip to Mars* (1903), *England Invaded* (1909), *A Message from Mars* (1921), and *Mars*

⁵² Muhammad, *The True History*, 167-8. Cf. Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 8; Muhammad, *Yakub*, 59.

Calling (1923). Of course, the ultimate Martian thriller would be the radio adaptation in 1938 of H. G. Wells's, *The War of the Worlds*, which frightened thousands of listeners due to its realism.⁵³

While Clegg makes an interesting point concerning the role of cinema in diffusing cultural trends such as the UFO phenomenon, it should be noted that cinema, such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Hallelujah* (1929), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and hundreds of other "race films," were also a medium through which notions of race were marketed *en masse* during the same time period, which may have participated in the easy conflation of race and cosmology in this mythology.⁵⁴ Although it is unclear what was the source of

⁵³ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 43-4.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the intersection and relevance of race and cosmology, see Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of the End Time* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998). See also, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronal Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 135-62, for a discussion of racial images in cinema and the media generally and Judith Weisenfeld, "'For the Cause of Mankind': The Bible, Racial Uplift, and Early Race Movies." In *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 728-42. Denzler is one of the texts that offers a

this information regarding UFOs, race, and cosmology in the narrative, one will recognize parallels between H. G. Well's UFO, for instance, and the Mothership that Farrakhan will later describe (see Chapter Six).

The narrative continues in its cosmic theme while returning to the notion of "writing." As such, written script was invented several trillion years later after the beginnings of the universe, due to the need to chronicle the future. The saga contends that thirty percent of the population was always discontent, and everyone was mortal, even though they were righteous and peaceful.⁵⁵ In a sense, the story wants to communicate the sense that a type of fall was inevitable, given the language it uses to describe the original people as discontent and mortal. As a result, twenty-three god-scientists wrote the future history, and the twenty-fourth analyzed what was written, perhaps made

history of cinema with respect to UFOs and science fiction, in particular Mars. I am unaware of a text that explores race, UFOs, and cinema. In fact, the conversation on race and UFOs, except for Lieb's book, is rare. Many of the discourses on UFOs explore how sex and sexuality are factors in UFO encounters, rather than race.

⁵⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 111. This discontentment and the need to chronicle the future history also raises conflicts about the nature of these beings and implies moral concerns. The conflict here is over the nature of the gods which is righteousness. In other words, given that their nature was good, Master Fard Muhammad had to lay a foundation that explains why they later needed to be found and "saved."

necessary by their mortality.⁵⁶ Again, Muhammad does not explain why the chroniclers were called “god-scientists.” By using this term, he may be attempting to communicate that these original black people were educated and systematic in their approach to the construction of knowledge. Subsequently, the texts that they developed became the Qur’an and the Bible in their modern and organized forms. Furthermore, these gods of earth were not eternal—they lived only two hundred to three hundred years then died. Moreover, time progressed in dispensations of twenty-five thousand year cycles, wherein a god was chosen in each of period to reveal the will of Allah.⁵⁷ The twenty-five thousand year dispensations that are written by twenty-four scientists correspond to the circumference of the Earth, roughly twenty-four thousand miles, and the twenty-four hours in a day.⁵⁸

The story is challenging to reconstruct, due to the fact that it has no coherent source or record. What seems to follow at this point, however, is that another god-scientist enters the narrative. This scientist is a predecessor of Yakub—and like Yakub is a renegade black scientist who appears on the scene sixty-six trillion years ago. Apparently angered over the linguistic and philosophical heterogeneity of the Original

⁵⁶ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 45. Such language describing the gods as mortal may be intended to counteract the notion that God is eternal and to reinforce the notion that God is embodied.

⁵⁷ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 44-5.

⁵⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 108.

People and his desire to rule,⁵⁹ he devised a plan in which he drilled a deep hole in the Earth, filled it with an explosive that was thirty percent more powerful than dynamite,⁶⁰ and detonated the bomb, which then separated the planet into the Earth and the Moon. More specifically, the Moon was split off or “deported”:

The Blasting away of MOON [*sic*] by an enemy that robbed the MOON of its life (water) and poured it onto this part of planet Earth...like this man or God who in his frenzy to try to force all the people to believe as he believed and to speak the same language with no difference in dialect, caused the deportation of the MOON from the Earth.⁶¹

This “deportation” of the Moon explains the existence of the Earth and the Moon, which prior to the explosion, was one planet. One of the original thirteen tribes was killed in this

⁵⁹ Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam*, 10.

⁶⁰ Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam*, 10.

⁶¹ Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam*, 14; Cf. Muhammad, *Yakub*, 26. Cf. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 44-5. Clegg suggests that the renegade scientist devised the plan and exploded the bomb due to his dismay regarding the multiplicity of dialects because of his desire to rule. Clearly, he misses that the scientist was also motivated by philosophical and/or theological differences among the people as seen above, and that these differences were the primary motivation for the sedition as seen in the quotation of Muhammad. Clegg claims, “An iconoclast, this deity was dismayed by the multilingual civilization that the black people had built and endeavored to introduce a lingua franca to replace regional dialects.”

explosion because the tribe ended up on the Moon, which did not have enough water to sustain life and died as a consequence. Notwithstanding, the twelve remaining tribes survived on Earth. The most resilient of them, the Tribe of Shabazz, went on a quest to find and settle the richest land on earth. This search led them to the Nile Valley (East Asia), from where they also founded a sister civilization in Mecca.⁶²

At this juncture, while this mythology functioned as both a theodicy and as counter-hegemonic discourse *contra* racist Western ideologies, the story reveals the depth at which Master Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad had internalized notions that suggested that “black” features were inferior and a distorted. In effort to explain black bodily phenotypes, the legend apologizes for stereotypical African characteristics in a way that offers a classical illustration of Duboisian “double consciousness,” or the practice of seeing oneself through the “revelation of the other world.”⁶³ Describing the story in *Message to the Blackman in America*, Muhammad passes over trillions of years of “history” and takes up the issue of East Asia, which is apparently where the Tribe of Shabazz lived for millennia.

The saga intimates that fifty thousand years ago⁶⁴ a dissatisfied scientist from the Tribe of Shabazz encouraged members of the clan to move their families to the “jungle”

⁶² Clegg, *An Original Man*, 44-5.

⁶³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 2-3.

⁶⁴ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 33. According to Muhammad, the Tribe of Shabazz had been on this part of the earth since “sixty trillion years ago when a great explosion on our planet divided it into two parts.” He unfortunately says nothing about

of East Asia (Africa) [read: uncivilized living] in order make the Original People “tough and hard...to prove to us that we could live there and conquer the wild beasts...”⁶⁵ and that this jungle experience adversely affected black features, which is the “origin of our kinky hair,”⁶⁶ and other distinctions, generally described in negative terms. Muhammad offers an example of this contention:

The Origin of our kinky hair, says Allah, came from one of our dissatisfied scientists, 50,000 years ago, who wanted to make all of us tough and hard in order to endure the life of the jungles of East Asia (Africa) and to overcome the beasts there. But he failed to get the others to agree with him. He took his family and moved into the jungle to prove to us that he could live there and conquer the wild beasts. . .⁶⁷

Muhammad infers here that black hair, to which he negatively refers as “kinky,” is the result of a “jungle” experience and as such represents a devolution in black physiology. What he fails to explain is how the degeneration of physical features of this particular family was transmitted to the greater black populous, especially since the majority of the

the period of time between sixty trillion years ago and when the scientist advocated going into the jungle fifty thousand years ago.

⁶⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 31. The saga also makes an unexplained temporal leap from trillions of years ago to tens of thousands of years ago.

⁶⁶ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 31. Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 33-4. Cf. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 48-9.

⁶⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 31-2.

Tribe of Shabazz disagreed with the need to follow him in order to be made durable. He also acquiesces to the popular conception that Africa was characterized by jungles that, in this case, were responsible transforming African American's features. Malcolm X, one of Muhammad's most important disciples, goes on to say that "nappy hair"⁶⁸ is a result of "living in a rough climate"⁶⁹ and that the remnants of this primordial hair can be seen in the eyebrows of black people, which are straight-haired.

Again, the tale unwittingly affirms negative meanings ascribed to black bodies by suggesting that their [African] traits signify corruption, distortion, wildness, and incivility, the very notions that the saga intends to counteract, even while positively associating Islam as the natural religion of the black race and Egypt as a great civilization of black people. In other words, Muhammad attempts to reclaim Egypt as the classical African civilization,⁷⁰ which has been ascribed to many cultures and peoples other than indigenous Africans, but he does not reconcile this with the claims about black features as a deviation from the ideal (Chapter One). Clegg remarks:

The repudiation of the terms *Africa* and *Africans* by the early Muslims, starting with Fard Muhammad, was by inference an attempt by the group to rid itself of

⁶⁸ A term that has negative connotations.

⁶⁹ Malcolm X. *The End of White World*, 48.

⁷⁰ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 15. Muhammad says, "We, the tribe of Shabazz, says Allah (God), were the first to discover the best part of our planet (earth) to live on, which is the rich Nile Valley of Egypt and the present seat of the Holy City, Mecca, Arabia."

the Western stereotypes and negative associations that the words attached to blackness. Transforming Africa into 'East Asia' made the continent more palatable to those converts who harbored a sense of shame in having roots in Africa. Yet, in a regrettable way, the attempt of Fard Muhammad to rationalize the origins of Negroid features denigrated natural characteristics of blacks from tropical Africa. To depict this part of the continent as uncivilized enough to strip away both the Caucasian features and Islamic culture of the Original People reinforced myths and racist stereotypes about Africa that were already popular in the Western world.⁷¹

Nevertheless, Fard and Muhammad would continue to propagate the saga in an effort to valorize black bodies in order to re-imagine them (see Chapter Three). What Muhammad does, nevertheless, is distance African Americans from the word "Africa" and the *some* of the negative views about it as savage and uncivilized. As Clegg notes above, even calling Africa "East Asia," can be read as an attempt to dissociate the origins of black people with the myths concerning Africa. Notwithstanding, the narrative foregrounds Egypt and Mecca, one cultural and the other religious, as central locations for the black race.

As the story goes, Yakub, the latest and the most significant of the god-scientists, is born near Mecca about six thousand years ago in the current twenty-five thousand year

⁷¹ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 48.

cycle,⁷² an event that was prophesied by the twenty-four scientists eighty-four hundred years prior to his birth.⁷³ Muhammad claims:

Six thousand years ago, or to be more exact 6,600 years ago, as Allah taught me, our nation gave birth to another God whose name was Yakub. He started studying the life germ of man to try making a new creation (new man) whom our twenty-four scientists had foretold 8,400 years before the birth of Mr. Yakub, and the Scientists were aware of his birth and work before he was born, as they are today of the intentions or ideas of the present world.⁷⁴

Known as the “Big Head” for his superior intellectual abilities and his arrogance or wisdom,⁷⁵ Yakub (or Yacub) was one of the thirty percent of those who was discontented.⁷⁶ Gifted with superior genius, he studied genetics (i.e., “the germ of man”) as the collective of god-scientists had prophesied.

⁷² Clegg, *An Original Man*, 49; Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 110; Muhammad, *Yakub*, 61. Recall that the world functions in twenty-five thousand year cycles in which new gods reign and new scriptural histories are written.

⁷³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 110.

⁷⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 110.

⁷⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 110-1; Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam*, 30-1.

⁷⁶ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 15. The contradiction that seems unexplained is how the Original people are “good by nature” and yet have the capacity to sin which Muhammad tries to indicate when he says that thirty percent are always dissatisfied.

To be sure, he was intent on making trouble for the Original People from the time of his youth, and his studies and unusual creativity would ultimately serve his goal of human destruction. He devised his plan from unusual sources, given his keen insight. For instance, he was able to discern the relationship between magnets and human attraction that would be the basis of his diabolical scheme. Muhammad explains:

Allah said: 'When Yakub was six years old, one day, he was sitting down playing with two pieces of steel. He noticed the magnetic power in the steel attracting the other. He looked up at his uncle and said: 'Uncle, when I get to be an old man, I am going to make a people who shall rule you.' The uncle said: 'What will you make; something to make mischief and cause bloodshed in the land?' Yakub said: 'Nevertheless, Uncle, I know that which you do not know.'⁷⁷

This episode with the magnets was a revelatory object lesson for Yakub, who apparently understood formal genetics and the notion of dominant and recessive traits. The magnets symbolized the power of attraction—how an “unlike”⁷⁸ people could attract, manipulate, and rule the Original People with lies and tricks. At the age of eighteen he had finished his formal education at the colleges and universities of his land, and he was esteemed as a brilliant scientist. Subsequently, he engaged in the study of eugenics in order to make such an “unlike” people who could dominate the Original People.

By studying the Original Man's “germ” [read: chromosomes] under a microscope, Yakub discovered that there were two “people” [read: genes] in him, one black and one

⁷⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 111-2.

⁷⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 112.

brown [read: dominant and recessive traits]. Through a type of eugenics or genetic engineering called grafting in which he separated the brown germ, he determined that he could “make” a [white] race of people who could rule and ultimately destroy the black nation⁷⁹:

He said if he could successfully separate the one from the other he could graft the brown germ into its last stage, which would be white. With his wisdom, he could make the white, which he discovered was the weaker of the black germ (which would be unlike) rule the black nation for a time (until a greater one than Yakub was born).⁸⁰

The source for Muhammad’s knowledge of rudimentary genetics is uncertain. Since he claimed to have learned such mysteries from Master Fard in the early 1930s, perhaps one

⁷⁹ Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 6-9; Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, 38; Cf.

Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 75. Evanzz suggests that Fard maintained that white people had only one gene for pigmentation, while black people had two. “This genetic discrepancy explained why a black man could create a white man through selective interracial reproduction, but a white man could never create a black man in the same way. White people knew that they would eventually be eliminated from the Earth if interracial marriages became routine, he said, so they had a survival imperative to maintain a social system of racial separation.”

⁸⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 112. The greater One who would be born is a reference to Master Fard Muhammad, the Saviour and Mahdi. The “weaker” germ seems to be a reference to recessive (and dominant) genes.

of them had encountered the work of geneticist Gregor Mendel or the related work in the agricultural sciences since “grafting” is an agrarian concept. Notwithstanding, Yakub discovered that he could engineer genetic traits, and he set out to make converts in order to create a community from among the Original People that would carry out his vision. He did so by seducing them with a corrupted form of Islam that promised riches and luxury to those who would follow his leadership.⁸¹

Fearing the national security threat due to the power that Yakub might develop because of his seductive doctrine and given his constantly growing audience, the King of Mecca (the city in which Yakub was born and raised) jailed Yakub and his followers. Nonetheless, converts, who believed that they could graft an unlike kind and then, by them, rule the Original People, continued to proliferate by way of wealth-based proselytizing that promised riches to converts.⁸² The King, concerned that such a crowd could easily be led to sedition, exiled Yakub and his fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine followers (60,000 with Yakub) to Pelan, an island in the Aegean Sea, known as Patmos in the Bible.⁸³ The King supported them, with finances and technology, for twenty years, helping them to establish their own civilization.⁸⁴ The commitment to

⁸¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 113.

⁸² This could also be read as a critique of Christianity which exploits black people economically by promising them wealth as a result of obedience.

⁸³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 113.

⁸⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 226. This is mere speculation, but this notion in the narrative may serve as the ideological basis for Muhammad’s suggestion that

financial assistance until Yakub's people could take care of themselves was in exchange for their cooperation with the exile. Moreover, the King was so afraid of Yakub that he would have been willing to make any deal with them.⁸⁵ Yakub promised his people that if they chose him as their king that he would share with them the esoteric knowledge that would give them the power to rule the people who had banished them. These events occurred about six thousand six hundred years ago in the present dispensation.

More specifically, Yakub set about organizing his genocidal civilization which privileged those who could participate in the destruction of the black race, the "Original Man," especially doctors, ministers, nurses, and cremators. The making of the white race would take six hundred years and though Yakub died at the age of one hundred fifty, by then he had passed on all of his secret knowledge to his followers. Through the process of grafting, he would separate the black germ from the brown germ, and from the brown germ would come the red, and from the red, the yellow—a six hundred year procedure until finally the white race was *made*. To guarantee the method, Yakub's people would forbid black people to marry one another and kill all the black babies that were born (and save the brown). The nurses would tell the new parents that the black babies had died and

America financially support the separate Black Nation for at least 20-25 years: "Naturally we would need help for the next 20 or 25 years. After that, we would be self-supporting!"

⁸⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 113.

gone on to a better place, that is, heaven, hence the importance of the doctors, nurses, ministers, cremators, and notions like heaven in the conspiracy.⁸⁶

This story indicates an anxiety that black bodies are in jeopardy. Though black bodies for the Nation included bodies that were phenotypically “brown,” “yellow,” and “red,” this suggests that the “black” or the darkest of black bodies were the most at risk of genocide. Furthermore, it could also function ideologically to support interdictions against miscegenation and exogamy, which in the above scenario could be read as protecting black bodies against the possibility of genetic extinction. This episode of the story may suggest Muhammad’s concern that black bodies are under attack systematically, given that religious, medical, funerary, and other institutions were conspiring to ensure that their perpetuation of was severely curtailed if not outright eliminated. Finally, such institutionalization of an agenda of violence against black bodies would mean that no one individual or organization had to maintain the system of destruction, for it was so strategically embedded in the structures of the society that it would continue to function after the death of its chief architect, Yakub. Important for this chapter is the notion that ideology and theology such as the use of concepts like as heaven obfuscate insidious practices that support the system of racial annihilation. For this reason, black people who are Christians were seen by Muhammad as the ultimate

⁸⁶ At the same time, the black race, the Tribe of Shabazz, included the black, brown, red, and yellow peoples. Cf. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 121: “The black nation, including its other three colors, brown, red and yellow, outnumber the Caucasian race, eleven to one.” See, Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 12-13.

betrayers of other black people and were viewed as utterly “whitenized” ideologically. Christianity, then, and those who embrace it can only serve evil and violent purposes against African Americans.

Muhammad explained how this process of grafting took place and also some of the social implications of it for black people, in addition to the obvious genocidal intent spoken of above:

After the first 200 years, Mr. Yakub had done away with the black babies, and all were brown. After another 200 years, he had all yellow or red, which was 400 years after being on ‘Pelan.’ Another 200 years, which brings us to the six hundredth year, Mr. Yakub had an all-pale white race of people on this Isle. Of course, Mr. Yakub lived but 150 years; but, his ideas continued in practice. . . The Yakub made devils were really pale white, with really blue eyes; which we think are the ugliest colors for a human eye. They were called Caucasian—which means, according to some Arab scholars, ‘One whose evil effect is not confined to one’s self alone, but affects others.’⁸⁷

It is in this culminating saga in which white people are made where the anthropological reversal that underlies the Yakub myth can be seen most clearly. That is to say, Muhammad, and presumably Fard, take hundreds of years of racial and theological

⁸⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 115-6; cf. Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 35-6. Note that the characteristics, that is pale skin and blue eyes, that have come to represent purity and the ideal image in the West, here are reversed and are seen as the apex of physical and moral corruption.

discourses that argued for the inferiority of black bodies and black intellect, and to paraphrase Anthony Pinn, flipped it on its head.⁸⁸ Instead of representing the standard and the most beautiful, Muhammad declares that what is viewed by some as the ideal for humanity (i.e., blond hair and blue eyes) is in fact a derogation of original black humanity.

The “devils” (i.e., because they were “made”) would terrorize and attempt to dominate the Original People for 6000 years,⁸⁹ first by returning to Mecca (Paradise) in 4 B.C.E. with a vengeful intent and being repelled by the King to West Asia (Europe).⁹⁰ The devils had caused the black nation to fight each other, an enduring legacy to this day for the so-called Negro who cannot unite.⁹¹ In West Asia (i.e., Europe), the white race would undergo a progressive degeneration toward incivility and animality until finally they were living in caves with dogs,⁹² running around nude, eating raw meat, climbing

⁸⁸ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 123.

⁸⁹ Muhammad, *The Flag*, 17-9; Muhammad, *The Science of Time*, 20-1; Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 10.

⁹⁰ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 51.

⁹¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 117.

⁹² Dogs are taboo in Islam and can only be kept for guarding herds and property. See, Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World*. 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 334. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 120. The dog as “man’s best friend” to white men can be traced historically to these caves in which they lived with whites.

trees, walking on their hands and feet, and engaging in all sorts of immorality and savagery,⁹³ subsequently no longer resembling the people Yakub made.⁹⁴ They even tried to graft themselves back into the black race,⁹⁵ and a few of them were lucky enough to begin the process, only getting as far as the gorilla, however.⁹⁶

⁹³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 119.

⁹⁴ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 52-3.

⁹⁵ Muhammad, *Yakub*, 31-2. Muhammad even discussed the possibility of salvation for the white race and suggested that it was possible through grafting them back into the black race, that is, by reversing the process of genetic engineering. I want to read this desire to (re)in-corporate the other as relating psychoanalytically to the desire to return to a state in which there was no subject-object differentiation between whites and blacks, if the humanities origins indeed have one source, generally accepted as African (and as expressed in the mythology). Furthermore, the mythology may express a desire to “save” what whites represent symbolically (i.e., evil) because this can be read as an part of what is black, having originated from black and existing in the black self in order that it be present in white selves. In the language of psychoanalytic object relations, Yakub can be interpreted as expressing unconscious desire to reincorporate that which has been lost, in this case, a primordial state in which black people were more “human” when they were more “animal.”

⁹⁶ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 119. This grafting process accounts for the existence of the entire monkey family.

The made race became so pathetic that Allah sent a series of prophets to raise their level of civilization in order that the prophecy that they would rule the black nation for six thousand years could be fulfilled. The first of these prophets was Musa (Moses), a “mulatto” sage, who around 2000 BCE brought them out of the caves and taught them how to cook meat and avoid pork. Later, Allah sent Jesus, but they (whites, Jews) killed him with a knife or sword against a wooden wall.⁹⁷

Jesus, who had been simply a mortal man of flesh and blood, was deified by conspirators, who sought to obscure the reality of Allah. December 25, the birthday of the wicked Nimrod, was designated Christmas, or the date of birth for Jesus, who was actually born in September. Additionally, a book, the Bible, that mixed spiritual truth and secular falsehood was promulgated as the authoritative text regarding the history of God and the creation, the life of Jesus and other prophets, and the nature of heaven and hell. The unholy conspiracy, later known as Christianity, was spearheaded by the pope of Rome, who is symbolized in the Book of Revelation as the dragon or devil. The Christian church, a masterpiece of tricknology. . .⁹⁸

Finally, in 622 C.E. (1 A.H.), Allah sent Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (i.e., the Prophet Muhammad) to counter the pernicious teachings of Christianity, the conspiratorial ideas that were meant to deceived the Original People, and the European whites rejected him.

⁹⁷ Muhammad, *The History of Jesus*, 20-1.

⁹⁸ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 55; cf. Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 13, 16; Muhammad, *The History of Jesus*, 22.

Muhammad was so dejected that he died of grief ten years later (632 C.E/10 A.H.). In short, Allah was attempting to redeem whites through these various prophets. Europeans then moved westward to a new land in America, after conquering the Muslim armies. They enslaved Native Americans but soon needed a new source of labor, taking Negroes from East Asia (Africa) as slaves and giving them Christianity which helped to make the “deaf, dumb and blind.”⁹⁹ Christianity, Muhammad argues, continues to function to make black bodies deaf, dumb, and blind, and to render black bodies *in-place* symbolically white, which is what Muhammad is suggesting about the Christianity as an instrument of oppression.

This narrative, like other mythologies, attempts to explain the nature of the universe, metaphysics, theological anthropology, and certainly evil and suffering that so-called Negroes had experienced for hundreds of years in America. At the same time, the epic reverses long-held notions about Africans and their descendants, especially in the United States and England—namely, that the hierarchical relationship between European-Americans and African Americans, in which black people were subjugated, was a metaphysically fixed relationship that was/is characterized by binary opposition: good-evil, right-wrong, beautiful-grotesque, intelligent-bestial, subject-object, and so on respectively.

⁹⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 55. Muhammad, *Birth of a Savoir*, 30.

In the scenario given to us by Master Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad,¹⁰⁰ this fixity is inverted, and it is the “white man” who is ontologically inferior, evil by nature, uncivilized, and deceptive, who utilizes Christianity to enslave and to delude the “original man” so that he forgets who he is—Muslim and Righteous by divine nature. He [the white man] is made, and because he is made, rather than created like the Lost-Found Tribe of Shabazz in the wilderness of North America,¹⁰¹ the devil, the 666 beast of the Book of Revelation,¹⁰² can do no righteousness with respect to the black nation. He, his tricks, and his deceptive religion are destined for destruction by God at the end of his six thousand year rule¹⁰³ for all of the murder and the ways in which he systematically

¹⁰⁰ The narrative ends with the Mother Plane, a UFO in which Master Fard (and later Muhammad) is located, returning to earth to end the age of Yakub (i.e., the white race) and usher in a millennial era of peace (See Chapters Three and Six). Chapter Three also fills in the gaps in the myth presented here regarding the racial identity of Master Fard Muhammad.

¹⁰¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 212-3.

¹⁰² Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam*, 17-18.

¹⁰³ Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 20; Muhammad, *The History of Jesus*, 53. This six thousand years of the beast was supposed to end in 1914, but Allah, Master Fard Muhammad, extended grace to the devil because of Allah’s mercy. E. Muhammad also suggested that prophesies of destruction never came to pass on the exact date and time given by the prediction. According to E. Muhammad, this extension was not supposed to be more than 70 years (i.e., 1984); see Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 23. This

hoodwinked the so-called Negro into forgetting their divine nature and religion. But ultimately it is Christianity that is the greatest ideological and conspiratorial force that is used to deceive black people and to whitenize black bodies.

The Science of Tricknology: Christianity and Black Bodies *In-Place*

Consistent with the mythology of Yakub, black people are Muslim and Righteous by nature for Muhammad. Christianity, which was used by the devil to enslave them, however, has led to a degeneration of culture and morality and has given rise to a sort of

date of 1914 is significant, and evidence strongly indicates that it as well as aspects of the NOI millenarianism, dispensationalism, idea of the one hundred, forty-four thousand elect, non-military service, anti-Catholic sentiments, et al. was borrowed from the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in the 1930s and specifically from Joseph P. “Judge” Rutherford, the second president of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad admired and encouraged their followers to hear. See, Benyon, “The Voodoo Cult,” 900; E. U. Essien-Udom. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 180; William A. Maesen. “Watchtower Influences on Black Muslim Eschatology: An Exploratory Study.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9.4 (Winter 1970): 321-5; Clegg, *An Original Man*, 72; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 96, 118, 538 14n and 15n; Dennis Walker. *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005), 318, 405-6, 568.

retrograde amnesia about their true nature and identity.¹⁰⁴ As the discursive and ideological legacy of Yakub, who used its concepts such as the belief in heaven to destroy black babies and hence to make white people, Christianity is the religion of the devil, and Yakub is its God since he was its originator. It is the master signifier of “tricknology,” a well developed system of lies, a skillful and crafty science of deception, that was used to enslave black bodies and is central to the perpetuation of their mental slavery. Muhammad states:

Christianity is a religion organized and backed by the devils for the purpose of making slaves of black mankind.¹⁰⁵ Freedom, Justice, Equality; money, good homes, etc.—these Christianity cannot give us (not the Christianity that has been taught us). He (Allah) said that Christianity was organized by the white race and they placed the name Jesus on it being the founder and author to deceive black people into accepting it.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 59.

¹⁰⁵ One will note frequent terminological and conceptual slippage by Muhammad’s uses of “mankind” to refer to the original people. Elsewhere, “mankind” can only refer to the devil, who is a kind, a genus. The original man is just that—original, not a kind. Consider Muhammad’s explanation: “Mankind, who is mankind? mankind is the caucasian [*sic*] race, often called the white race. They are a made people so God has taught me and so the scripture verifies, that not created from the original man, but came after him and a grafted man from the original man.” See, Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 13-4.

The very purpose of Christianity is to serve in the making “slaves” of black people so that it is an abject contradiction for a black person to be Christian for Muhammad. In the strongest possible terms, Christianity means “white” for him, so that black and “Christian” signifies having been “whitenized” symbolically and serving the purpose of assisting in the maintenance of their own people’s oppression.

This relationship between Christianity and black slavery is symbolized by John Hawkins, a frequently-referenced English slave trader who Muhammad locates erroneously as solely responsible for enslaving and transporting millions of Africans to America in 1555, in his slave ship “Jesus”¹⁰⁷:

John Hawkins brought our forefathers here (from Africa) on a ship named ‘Jesus’; when this ship was on its way back from another load of our people, our foreparents stared at the old slave ship as it departed and begged to be carried back, but to no avail, and they said that ‘you can have this new Western world but give us the ship Jesus back to our people and country,’ which now has become a song among our people, which goes something like this: ‘You – can – have – all – the – world – but – give – me – Jesus.’¹⁰⁸

Again, the fact that the slave ship is named “Jesus” has vast implications for Muhammad. On the one hand, it represents Christianity’s role in the transportation of Africans from their lands of origin to slavery in America. On the other hand, he seems to suggest that

¹⁰⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 3, 230; Muhammad, *Tricknology of the Enemy*, 1. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ For example, Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 16-7.

the ostensible longing for Jesus in black spiritual songs was really a desire to return to their home in Africa via the slave ship.

Christianity as a religious discourse and social philosophy conspired and functioned with the white race as a means of oppressing the black nation, perpetuating its social and economic dependency and control while promulgating their mental and spiritual inferiority. This is why Christianity is the trick of the devil writ large.¹⁰⁹ As such, Yakub myth represents, among other things, intellectual resistance by black bodies to the totalizing and deterministic effects of a dominating and oppressive social system that functions to order and secure social relations between the “races.” It seeks to disrupt, however inadequately, the perpetual reproduction of societies and institutions that terrorize and dehumanize black people (See Chapter Seven).

Conversely, Christianity serves to fix black bodies *in-place*, socially and symbolically, in a state of subjugation—“slavery.” As a result, Elijah Muhammad hated Christianity, and he saw it as demonic and as synonymous with whiteness and having the power to “whitenize” black people. As an illustration, speaking at a Saviour’s Day event ostensibly in 1958 that was also patronized by a large contingency of four hundred African American Christians, Muhammad told them:

He uses the name Jesus, but you should be wise. The white man doesn’t want to recognize no Black prophet, nor any Black angel, nor any God that is Black. He’s got to be a white prophet. He’s got to be a white angel. He’s got to be a

¹⁰⁹ Muhammad, *Birth of a Savior*, 32-3; Muhammad, *History of Jesus*, 17; Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 32-3. Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 50.

white God for him to recognize him. And he has you following that particular color, white. And he's indirectly made you to believe or think that when you go to heaven, you will be white like himself. Therefore that makes you always inclined to that particular color and desire to be that color instead of your own original color.¹¹⁰

African Americans, then, who were the promoters of the "devil's" religion, were the most deceived, the most ignorant, and the most "whitenized," and indeed the worst traitors of their race, as they functioned in service of their own people's domination, often without the awareness that they were being used and tricked into doing so. Muhammad points out the apparent contradiction, since for him white people would never recognize a black religion with a black pantheon, but African American Christians reflect the racist character of Christianity in the sense that as black bodies *in-place* symbolically, they have to embrace the most pervasive ideology of white supremacy, which is Christianity, its practices, and its symbols.

No class of people embodied this reality of having been whitenized more than African American Christian preachers. The "poor black clergy class" was the "worst," the epitome of those who were deluded by the white man's technology of tricks.¹¹¹ Whereas the divine nature of the true African American was black, Muslim, and righteous, the

¹¹⁰ Muhammad, *Birth of a Savior*, 28. See also, Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 72; Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 70, 78.

¹¹¹ Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 57. Cf. Walker, *Islam and the Search*, 313-6.

“Negro” preacher was the antithesis—“white,” Christian, “untrustworthy.”¹¹² Although Muhammad viewed preachers as one group or “class,” no one symbolized his disdain for them more than, the Civil Rights leader of the 1950s and 1960s, the Reverend. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who appeared fearful of the reception of the NOI’s doctrine by whites:

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., wants brotherhood with white America for himself and his followers. As reported here, the Nobel Peace Prize was conferred on him in Norway. Reverend King sharply warned in St. Paul’s Cathedral that ‘A doctrine of black supremacy was as great a danger as one of white supremacy’. . . Of his own people he said, ‘We must not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage substituting injustice of one type for that of another.’ I have never heard of any such talk coming from a leader’s mouth in all of my life. If a man is NOT going to rise from a position of disadvantage why is he preaching for the passage of the Civil Rights Bill for his people?. . . This kind of talk coming from a theological college graduate is almost unbelievable.¹¹³

Even here, Muhammad suggests that King’s words erroneously indict the NOI as a reversal of supremacist ideologies and practices. Muhammad wants to show that it is this kind of rhetoric coming from a black Christian preacher that is an example of how far black bodies have fallen from their divine state by accepting the Christian religion. Muhammad is even more astounded that someone as theologically educated as Rev. King

¹¹² Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 57.

¹¹³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 241.

can be so ignorant of the devil's tricknology, ostensibly implying also that King is a hypocrite by advocating passage of the Civil Rights Bill.

Since Dr. King represented the body politic of "reverends," he received the sharpest condemnation, but save for a few "acceptable" preachers, like Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.,¹¹⁴ they were all the same. These preachers were transformed by Christianity ideologically so that for all intent and purposes, they functioned as though they were "white" vis-à-vis other black bodies. Subsequently, Muhammad leveled three basic critiques of them that were grounded in the perception that they were "whitenized" black bodies that had been rendered symbolically *in-place* by the devil's tricknology.

First, Muhammad's critiqued black bodies *in-place* for their character or lack of it. Preachers were anathema to him, and his appraisal of them, their whiteness, and their symbolic *in-placeness* was castigating, violent, and personal. To Muhammad, black preachers were lazy, fearful, ignorant, and enemies to their own people,¹¹⁵ suggesting that:

Their mind and their heart is set upon the white man to be white. They want to be the children of white people. . . They are a foolish people; they are the most ignorant and the foolish and frightened and the most dreadful leadership that I ever heard tell [*sic*] of in all the days of my life, it is the American so-called Negro preachers. He would not even look at you if he thought the white man

¹¹⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 173.

¹¹⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 47; Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 55-7.

didn't like you. He wouldn't mention your name in his [i.e., white people's]¹¹⁶ presence for nothing in the world only in the way of hate, scandal and disgrace...¹¹⁷

Not only did these preachers lack the fortitude and courage to confront white supremacy, they were also selfish and self-serving, like Dr. King's acceptance of the Nobel Prize, which afforded him a forum to address whites in a venue that had never before allowed a black person to speak there.

The accolades made sense to Muhammad, given that Dr. King preached only conciliatory messages that benefited him and the status quo for whites. Accordingly, Muhammad intimates that King would even avoid gazing upon an African American that white people did not like, all of which was in service of continued white domination of black people, Muhammad believed. He retorted, "No wonder he had the privilege of going into a cathedral where no so-called Negro had ever stood in the pulpit."¹¹⁸ As a result of being "whitenized" by Christianity and serving as a good instrument of white control, Muhammad thought King was rewarded with recognition by whites, such as speaking in great cathedrals and winning the Nobel Prize. Dr. King demonstrated his self-interest, not only by accepting the award, which he should have denounced due to injustice and inhumane treatment of black people, but also by accepting the substantial

¹¹⁶ Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁷ Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 54.

¹¹⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 241.

award money, that at the time was more than fifty thousand dollars.¹¹⁹ Even if King refused the medal, “The money could have been accepted, since his people need it. Even if he did not need it himself, there are poor among his followers who really need financial help. He won neither peace nor justice for his people.”¹²⁰

Preachers were more than selfish, they were profoundly ignorant, even though, like King, they may have been college educated. They still did not have the sense to recognize that they were being manipulated by the tricknology of the enemy. In fact, Muhammad thought, the Negro preacher was “blind, deaf and dumb”¹²¹—too stupid to realize that they were slaves and that they were being used to keep their people in bondage, having been blinded by their love for whites.¹²² Yet, Muhammad was not the first to criticize the black clergy class regarding their suspect character and education. Others in black communities had long been suspicious of African American preachers.

More than half a century earlier (1901), for instance, Booker T. Washington, considered by some to be the eminent, though disputed, black leader during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was critical of black preachers during the

¹¹⁹ See, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html. Accessed on May 18, 2007. The biography of King on the Nobel Prize site states that he contributed the money to advance the Civil Rights movement. The biography was the one used for the Nobel Laureate proceedings in 1964.

¹²⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 240.

¹²¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 242. cf. Walker, *Islam and the Search*, 316.

¹²² Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 54.

Reconstruction era. He was concerned by the paucity of education among the two predominant professions for black people who were recently emancipated—that of teaching and preaching. He suggested that many people took up these vocations as a racket, to earn an easy living:

Naturally, most of our people who received little education became teachers or preachers. While among these two classes of people there were many capable, godly men and women, still a large proportion took up teaching or preaching as an easy way to make a living. . . . The ministry was the profession that suffered the most—and still suffers, though there has been great improvement—on account of not only ignorant but in many cases immoral men who claim they were ‘called to preach.’ In the earlier days of freedom almost every coloured man who learned to read would receive the ‘call to preach’ within a few days after he began reading. . . . When we add the number of wholly ignorant men who preached or ‘exhorted’ to that of those who possessed something of an education, it can be seen at a glance that the supply of ministers was large.¹²³

Here, Washington is critical of Christian preachers, who have become ministers because it was an easy way of living. He does not reject preachers wholesale as Muhammad does, however, for he affirms that some preachers are “godly.” Yet, Washington’s concern that many preachers are uninformed and opportunistic would find ample affirmation from

¹²³ Booker T. Washington. *Up from Slavery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47-8. He goes on to say that while the morality has improve, it has done so mostly for those seeking to be teachers and not a much for the preachers.

Muhammad for whom African American Christian ministers were “icemakers” because they froze the minds of people in ignorance.¹²⁴ In a nutshell, the Negro preacher was a “hindrance to the truth of our people. . . The preachers are afraid of the truth.”¹²⁵ Their questionable character made them more susceptible to the tricknology of the enemy.

Second, Muhammad critiqued black bodies *in-place* their beliefs, important since he viewed Christianity as the weapon of white hegemony.¹²⁶ Again, Christianity was synonymous with whiteness in the mythology of Yakub, and Islam was the natural religion of the black race.¹²⁷ In other words, Christianity whitenized black people symbolically. Therefore, as a people who were ontologically Muslim, their Christian orientation defiled and polluted them, corrupted their god-given sensibilities as righteous and good. As such, white religious ideology functioned to construct black bodies as *in-place* as untrustworthy sell outs. This explained, for Muhammad, why preachers could

¹²⁴ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 27.

¹²⁵ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 14.

¹²⁶ Walker, *Islam and the Search*, 316.

¹²⁷ Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 5-6. The notion that “Islam” is associated with or means “black” may antedate the transmission of the Yakub narrative from Master Fard Muhammad to Elijah Muhammad and at the same time, it may be part of the theoretical genealogy of the mythology. However, the details lie beyond the purview of this chapter. See, Richard Brent Turner. “Edward Wilmot Blyden and Pan-Africanism: The Ideological Roots of Islam and Black Nationalism in the United States.” *The Muslim World* 87.2 (1997): 169-82.

act in ways that caused disunity among black people or in ways that would seem to favor white people over their own communities.

What was really going on with preachers and so-called Negro Christians, Muhammad suggests, was that the religion of Yakub signified “tricknology” in the ultimate sense of the word, for Christianity really veiled a worship of white people behind the veneration of religious ideas and symbols. Muhammad exclaims, “The only thing that will hold the Negro is his belief in whites as divinity. They hold to his religion which they [i.e., whites]¹²⁸ use to deceive everyone they possibly can.”¹²⁹ Muhammad saw evidence of this in many places—case in point, religious icons:

More than anyone else, those who worship his image (the so-called Negroes) are guilty of loving the white race and all that the race stands for. One can even find the pictures of white people on the walls, mantel, shelves, dressers and tables of their homes. Some carry them on their person. The so-called Negroes go to church and bow down to their statues under the name of Jesus and Mary and some under the name of Jesus’ disciples, which are only the images of the white race, their arch-deceiver.¹³⁰

Indeed, Christian belief had deleterious effects on the black psyches and self-images, causing African Americans to become enamored by white physical features and “white” ideals. Accepting Christianity for African Americans, then, meant a total rejection of

¹²⁸ Emphasis is mine.

¹²⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 47 cf. 83.

¹³⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 83.

black self-respect and an uncritical embrace of everything “white.” This devotion to whites and black symbolic *in-placeness* was so complete that some black people would even carry pictures of white religious icons with them. In fact, Muhammad places the locus of black erotic desire for whites squarely in Christian influence. Consequently, the slave master became an idol for African Americans as did white women, he argued. They became the objects of intense desire and veneration, despite the fact that they were physically objectionable. Muhammad proclaims, “We worshipped the false beauty of the Slavemaster’s [*sic*] leprous looking women.”¹³¹ Accordingly, the African American Christian longed for the day when the Christian “plurality (trinity) of white gods” would allow black people to “mix” (i.e., miscegenation) with white people.¹³²

Yet again, it was African American preachers like Martin King who exacerbated the problem of this asymmetrical “love” relationship, between black and white peoples, in which the so-called Negroes were love struck by lovers who did not receive love in return from whites, who in reality regarded them with contempt. On the subject of this lop-sided love affair, Muhammad suggested that black bodies that were symbolically *in-place* like King were intentionally complicit in manipulating black people:

There are many of my poor black ignorant brothers and even preachers preaching the ignorant and lying stuff that you should love your enemy. What fool can love his enemy? Martin Luther calls himself a preacher and has written

¹³¹ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 6.

¹³² Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 6. See also, Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 41.

a book to try to fool you,¹³³ to make you love the devil himself. How can Martin Luther, being the minister of God, he claims, teach his people to love their enemy, when God Himself said he had set a day to deal with his enemies. And he said himself, according to the Bible that Martin Luther reads, that there were two brothers—I loved one and hated the other. . . . Here comes the truth of the white man making you know that he cannot love—that he is the devil himself.¹³⁴

Muhammad's remonstrance against Christianity was more than the loathsome notion of love for one's enemies. He also argued against the evangelical and fundamentalist doctrines of the Trinity, the "brotherhood" of "man," the deity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the death of "white" Jesus for the redemption of humanity, the inerrancy of Scripture (impossible since whites tampered with it and altered it making it a "poison book"¹³⁵),

¹³³ Muhammad is most likely referring to King's book, *Strength to Love*, a collection of sermons which was published in 1963, the year before the publication of *Message to the Blackman in America*. It is also possible, though not likely, however, that Muhammad was referring to King's book *Why We Can't Wait*, which was also first published in 1963. See, Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963); Martin Luther King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000).

¹³⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 236.

¹³⁵ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 74; Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 12-3; Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 90.

Heaven, and the mystery and spirit existence of God.¹³⁶ All of these doctrines seemed to indicate for him how far whitenized black bodies *in-place* had fallen from their original state and had bought into such a demonic ideology that, as Yakub's story indicates, was clearly used to kill and enslave black bodies. Christian preachers, then, were the worst type of "black" bodies (see Chapter Seven) because not only did they sell out and embrace Yakub's religion, they became promulgators of it to their "own" people.

At the same time, Muhammad's polemic against Christianity and its black preachers was self-serving, since he desired to prove his own eschatology, namely, that the prophecies of the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus point to an actual, physical, bodily, savior, who came in the person of Master Fard Muhammad, "God in person."¹³⁷ As a result, Muhammad railed against any Christian teaching that would diminish the site of the black body as ultimate materiality and meaning—anything that would spiritualize and disembodify Allah. He was particularly aggressive in his assault on the Christian ideas of Heaven and the incorporeality and immateriality of the Divine, which were an affront to Allah and to black bodies:

We are daily and nightly mistreated at the hand of our slavemasters' children who are ever happy to do us evil and never rejoice to do us good. They have

¹³⁶ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 12-3, 25-6, 30; Muhammad, *History of Jesus*, 10-12, 14, 20, 22ff, 29, 44; Muhammad, *Birth of a Savior*, 8, 14, 24, 38; Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 25, 47, 83-4; Muhammad, *Yakub*, 98; Muhammad, *True History of Master Fard Muhammad*, 101.

¹³⁷ See, Muhammad, *History of Jesus*; Muhammad, *History of the Nation*.

caused us to work under false promises. And never fulfill any promise of good to us today as it were yesterday. . . . That is to deceive us and make us false promises. As the slavemasters deceived us in many ways back near four hundred years ago. And making us promises that if we be obedient to them we would go to heaven when we die. . . . All of this preaching forty or fifty years ago by the church man, the preacher. . . .¹³⁸

Christianity was tricknology in that it served ideologically to support the mistreatment of black people, who were promised that heaven would be their reward for obedient service. Heaven was a lie. Rather, theology for Muhammad was earthbound. The notion of Heaven was one that the slave master used to justify slavery, teaching that the slaves would get their reward in the afterlife, while the slave owning body politic received theirs in the here and now.¹³⁹ In reality, Heaven and Hell were right here—at least Heaven could be brought into existence on earth. Hell was already here and now. Therefore, the idea of Heaven is connected with all of the deplorable and atrocious meanings that black bodies carry socially that result from the denigration and violence of slavery. For this

¹³⁸ Muhammad, *Tricknology of the Enemy*, 2-3. See also, Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 25-6, 30; Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 25;

¹³⁹ Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 16. “We must forget that old slavery talk and thinking that one day God is going to rise us up out of the grave and we’re going to heaven—get that out of your mind. This is heaven now if you want to go in it. The coming of God and His words, teaching here among us is heaven.”

reason, the Negro preacher who teaches it is vile because “he” participates in the deception and in the devaluation of black bodies.

Along the same lines, Muhammad vehemently denounced the idea that God is a mystery or an incorporeal spirit, in his words, “a spook.”¹⁴⁰ Once more, he connects this concept existentially to slavery and eschatologically to the bodily existence of Master Fard Muhammad, the Great God and Mahdi, whose mission it was to find the lost nation of black people of in the wilderness of North America¹⁴¹ and restore them (i.e., black bodies) to their cosmic and natural state (see Chapter Three). Consequently, God had to be a man (physically and in terms of gender) in order that people might recognize him¹⁴²:

The prophets warned us of a time that would come when God would judge the wicked and punish, or rather destroy, the wicked and give the earth over to the rule of a righteous people. So many of us have misunderstood just what we should expect. What will God look like?¹⁴³

The implication is that Christians do not really know God because if they did they would know that God is a living, breathing, black human being just like them, otherwise “He” could not be their God and savior. God cannot be a mystery, he replies, because one

¹⁴⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 3, 5, 7, 10; Muhammad, *Science of Time*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 17.

¹⁴² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 15.

¹⁴³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 15.

would have no way of recognizing a god who did not have a body. Muhammad says explicitly that Christians cannot know God for this reason.¹⁴⁴

The surest evidence that God is a man, contrary to the teaching of the Christian preachers, is that God speaks, and language is an embodied and material phenomenon:

They [the prophets] tell us that they heard God's voice speaking to them in their own language. Can a spirit speak a language while being and immaterial something? If God is not material, what pleasure would He get out of material beings and the material universe?¹⁴⁵

The same reasoning holds for the materiality of the devil.¹⁴⁶ The devil is no spook either, and African American Muslims can recognize him. Unfortunately, Christians and preachers are still mentally dead, unable to see the devil for who and what he is.¹⁴⁷

Because of this, whitenized black bodies are bound to remain *in-place*, for it is the nature of Christian teaching to keep their identity fixed and their activity and possibilities limited.

Finally, Muhammad critiqued black bodies *in-place* because of their practices. It follows that, if he questioned the character of black preachers, believed them to be ignorant, untrustworthy, and fearful, and that their Christian religion ensured that they

¹⁴⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 1.

¹⁴⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ Although Elijah Muhammad claimed that Martin Luther King, Jr. called whites the devil in a private meeting. See, Walker, *Islam and the Search*, 316.

behave in ways that acquiesce to white supremacy, their social and religious practices would reflect their *in-placeness*, as bodies that had been whitenized. Because these practices conflicted with essential elements of NOI praxis, Muhammad had little or no tolerance for the products of the devil's science of tricks.

Highest on the list of practices for which Muhammad expressed disdain was integration. Integration, he thought, was insanity. Who in their right mind would desire to live, go to school, and work with a devil, who had enslaved them, lynched them, and raped their women? This desire to integrate is indicative of a sick kind of love, a masochistic desire for the affection of whites:

The unwillingness of the slaves to leave their masters is due to their great love for the slave-masters. If America is unwilling to grant her 22 million ex-slaves freedom to go for self today, it is the same unwillingness of white America's forefathers in dealing with our parents less than 100 years ago. . . . As long as my people are the blind lovers of their enemies, they will seek to forever return to the bosom of their masters in no better status or position than that of a slave.¹⁴⁸

Whitenized black bodies, then, were seen as being nostalgic for slavery and as emotionally dependent upon their "slave-masters." In particular, he considered the Civil Rights preachers and Martin Luther King, Jr. exceedingly appalling because they claimed to speak for God and to be leaders of the people in their quest for freedom, justice, and

¹⁴⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 226-7. Cf. Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 11-12,

equality. To the contrary, Muhammad concluded, they were “leading” people into the “Hell” from which they needed liberation.

The head of this movement, Mr. King, is trying to force the white men in the South to do that which is against his will and nature. . . But Mr. King has not learned as yet that the white man in the South is brethren to the white man in Washington and the Washington white man is a brother to the Southern white man... Therefore, Mr. King is making a fool of himself in the South and acting like a dog around the house, where the master stands at the door and the dog wants something to eat and just waddles all around the door, around the master’s feet, whipping his tail on the ground and grinning and leaning his ears back on his neck to show that he is a good, peaceful dog, and master, give me a piece of your meat that you have there in your house.¹⁴⁹

Muhammad saw the efforts of Dr. King as futile because whites could not operate in ways that would benefit African Americans; it was against their nature. King, he thought, was analogous to a dog who begged for food from its master. Most importantly, he saw King’s focus on the racism of the southern United States as misguided, since white people in the South were connected to institutional power in America such as in Washington, D.C. They were not distinct from it.

Rather, Muhammad maintains, separation is what black people needed and land of their own on which to live in a way that reflected their desire for their own lives. Contrary to Edward Curtis’ claim that Muhammad “rejected calls for blacks to return to

¹⁴⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 318.

Africa, since it was North American blacks that would lead other persons of color toward the restoration of black greatness”¹⁵⁰ Muhammad did advocate a return to Africa. It was only if Americans did not allow black people to leave that they should create a place for them in the United States.

The American white man is not going to move out of his estate to give to the so-called Negroes. We are not asking you to do any such thing. No, only unless you prevent our going to our own. If you are going to prevent us from going to our own, or back where we came from, where you found us, then give us a place here for ourselves.¹⁵¹

Muhammad saw no evidence in history that integration made any sense, that white people could be trusted to do what was good and right for black people.¹⁵² Again, it was against their nature to be good and peaceful, and the Civil Rights preachers had believed the lie, namely, that whites wanted integration and peace. Separation was the only solution to the race problem, but blinded by the ideology of Christianity, which had whitenized them, the preacher were blind to this reality. As such, Muhammad wanted land in the U.S. for a black nation or the unfettered right to return to Africa.

¹⁵⁰ Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 12. See also, Chapter Four, 48n.

¹⁵¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 317. Cf. Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, Vol. Two, 18, 24.

¹⁵² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 312.

Because whites were violent and murderous by nature, according to the narrative of Yakub, Muhammad thought it was equally silly for the Civil Rights preachers to practice non-violence as a method of social change. To some extent, he believed that the preachers were fearful and therefore lacked the fortitude to defend themselves against violent attacks. Whatever the case, nonviolence in the face of violence against you was inappropriate. Speaking of Dr. King and his followers, he suggests that self-defense against dogs and police would be justified but not without consequences:

The so-called Negroes of Birmingham, Alabama, would have been justified by the law of justice if they had killed every dog sicked [sic] upon them by the hired, tax-paid policemen, for the tax-payers did not hire dogs to police their lives and property. And if the policemen had fired upon those who defended themselves against the bites of savage dogs that the Police Department trained expressly for the purpose of attacking so-called Negroes, they would have been justified by God and the Divine law of self-defense to fight and defend themselves against such savage dog and human attack.¹⁵³

He warns, however, that, in the instance he cites as soon as black people defended themselves against dogs and police by throwing rocks, the federal government called in the Army, “not to help the so-called Negroes against the white southerners,”¹⁵⁴ but to support those who were abusing black citizens.

¹⁵³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 217.

¹⁵⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 218.

Integration and nonviolence are not the only practices that Muhammad associates with black bodies *in-place* that have been whitenized by Christianity. He was strongly opposed to eating “traditional” African American foods that he understands as slave food¹⁵⁵ and to wearing the slave master’s names,¹⁵⁶ two items that I will take up in detail in Chapter Three. Suffice it to say, that the consumption of slave food and the use of slave names signify *in-placeness*. Such bodies were like the Christian preachers who practice and advocate integration and nonviolence, they have been duped by the devil’s schemes—tricknology that he uses to ensure that black men and women will remain enslaved mentally and limited socially and economically.

Conclusion

Elijah Muhammad critiqued black bodies that had been “whitenized” by Christianity because they were antithetical to what he understood as the divine nature of black people as both Muslim and Righteous, and by it, black bodies were constituted *in-place*, fixed in identity and severely limited in social activity. Rooted in the myth of Yakub, Christianity was a religion that the slave master used to make black people slaves and to maintain the institution of slavery for hundreds of years. It was synonymous with white supremacy and Yakub’s desire to dominate and destroy the original black people.

This story of Yakub connected Muhammad’s followers to a cosmology that gave them some basis for making sense of the world. It communicated to them that whites

¹⁵⁵ Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 22-3; Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 18.

¹⁵⁶ *Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 14; Muhammad, *Tricknology*, 9.

were violent because it was their nature and purpose as a grafted, “made,” and “unlike kind” to be unruly and incorrigible. As a source of secret knowledge about the universe, the story of Yakub, with its fanciful details of life on other planets and its notion of racial eugenics and genetic engineering, was given legitimacy and consistency in the life of Muhammad, by his experiences of violence that seemed omnipresent and as much a part of his reality as the air he breathed. Racial violence, for him, was everywhere, ubiquitous. More importantly, the mythology’s cosmic reality “lifted” the meaning of black bodies from this earth where they had been dehumanized and disfigured and connected them to a celestial reality that gave them new transcendent and ultimate meaning (Chapter Three). Islam too became cosmic, and unlike Christianity, it was the religion of the universe, the one and true religion of the “Original Man.”

Therefore, embracing Christianity made African Americans untrustworthy, weak, and ineffective in the struggle for black equality—all while it deceived them about their true nature and about the saviour, Master Fard Muhammad, Allah in the flesh, who came to reconnect them to their divine heritage and birthright. In short, Christianity was tricknology, a science of deception that was so skillfully crafted that African Americans were often unaware that its doctrines rendered them perpetually obsequious. As such, it was the religion of Yakub.

The black purveyors of this religious ideology that function in service to white domination were the so-called Negro preachers, and Muhammad showed little mercy in his castigations of their character, beliefs, and practices. Dennis Walker summarizes much of the issue poignantly:

It has been argued that the anti-Christianity voiced by the Black Muslims from 1930 was in response to the temporary context of the black clergy's turn to accommodation to the white American system as it became harsher and more segregationist toward the end of the 19th century. The black churches were accumulating property, and impressing on the masses the image of a non-violent, patiently suffering, otherworldly Jesus, arguing that white hostility and narrow opportunities here had to be borne to win bliss in a better world to come.¹⁵⁷

Such is one of the claims that this chapter has attempted to express. The ostensible leader of these preachers, who epitomized the need for mental resurrection for Muhammad, was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Educated though he was, he remained ignorant to the Truth. Only Islam could bring freedom, justice, and equality to the black race, and Muhammad was intent on re-imagining re-making the race, including these black bodies *in-place* and those that had been symbolically "whitenized" by Christianity.

¹⁵⁷ Walker, *Islam and the Search*, 313-4.

Chapter Three

Re-imagining the Race and Re-presentation: Elijah Muhammad, Transcendent Blackness, and the Construction of Ideal Black Bodies

Thus far, Chapter One focused on the history of the NOI emphasizing the four critical moments that concern this study, that of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan, while mapping the events and ideas that pointed to significant dimensions and revisions of racialized black bodies. For example, Elijah Muhammad instituted dress codes for men and women in the NOI, which one could argue valorized black bodies. In addition, Chapter One explored relevant theoretical notions related to embodiment, advancing a particular theory of the body, “black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*,” which frames this study. The chapter also suggested that the body to which the NOI was responding was the grotesque black body *in-place*, a body that was negatively racialized and fixed as inferior.

In Chapter Two, I described Muhammad’s iconoclastic criticisms of constructions of the black body that for him operated in service of white domination and were both ideologically and socially ‘whitened’ by Christianity. As indicated in Chapter One and Chapter Two, Elijah Muhammad and the NOI found black bodies *in-place* deplorable. In response, Chapter Three gives attention to Muhammad’s soteriological efforts to re-present black bodies, a dialectical process of deconstructing black bodies *in-place* that

Chapter Two argued epitomized by so-called Negro Christians.¹ Here, Muhammad re-imagines black bodies that are *out-of-place*, and as a result this, they are perceived as dangerous to the *status quo* of the dominant culture. To that end, the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that the ideal or apotheosized and ultimate black body for Muhammad was a religious body that was a black body *out-of-place* symbolically,² and that this body can be interpreted as being transcendentally black (i.e., metaphysically black),³ in that it is

¹ But these were also bodies that were fixed as inferior and grotesque by a European gaze and were saturated with negative meanings that racialized it.

² While the distinction between symbolic and social *out-of-placeness*, is not always discrete, symbolic concerns encompass those intellectual, attitudinal, and personal religious practices that raised the status of black bodies, primarily regarding one's self-consciousness and self-regard and by extension, even if not intentionally, in society. Symbolic *out-of-placeness*, for example, might involve a person thinking that he/she is greater than what society has rendered and fixed that person's identity—becoming educated (even if self-educated), or critiquing white supremacy and black bodies as “whitenized” as in the case of Muhammad. Social *out-of-placeness*, on the other hand, entails physical bodies transgressing established social categories of activity, that often imply geographical considerations, such as being in the “wrong” neighborhood or having inter-racial sex or miscegenation, for instance.

³ I am using metaphysics here to encompass discussions about the nature and meaning of reality and existence. See the essay “What is Metaphysics” in Theodore Walker, Jr.,

a semiotic embodiment that epistemologically uncovers and discloses ultimate reality which is cosmological and “extraterrestrial” even in its materiality.⁴

This chapter will accomplish this in two ways: First, it will argue that Muhammad sought to re-imagine what black bodies could be and that he used a variety of philosophical and theological resources and rituals in his endeavor to construct

Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 73-80.

⁴ Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaf, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 1-20. My contention here will be that at least part of interpreting the NOI will depend on the theories and methods of the emerging academic field of Western Esotericism, from which we may gain some insights regarding syncretism, numerology (especially Chapter Six and Louis Farrakhan), Freemasonry, ufology (e.g., the Mother Plane), interplanetary cosmology, and in particular, gnosis within the NOI. I would also add that, given that the field is “new,” the study of black religion and esotericism is an under-explored conversation. While “New Age” is a popular nomenclature for esotericism, it differs from the academic field that studies the history of religious ideas in America and Western Europe utilizing a historical/contextual, textual, and empirical methodology. Furthermore, even though NOI religion was very earthbound and material, its meanings were tied to mythology that was transcendent beings tied to secret knowledge and beings on other planets.

“beautiful” bodies.⁵ Second, ideal bodies had specific social and symbolic characteristics, constituting a distinct black bodily economy that distinguished NOI bodies from other black bodies through ritualized and mythologized differentiation.⁶ Likewise, the construction of “*the body*” here is complex, given that ritual and discursive sources that constitute these bodies varied depending on whether Muhammad’s concern was for the body as a biological reality or the body as symbolization of the NOI collective and cosmology.

What follows below are brief descriptions of the sources, discourses, and rituals that Muhammad utilized to (re)construct the bodies of the so-called Negroes of North America. In short, he drew from these resources to make black bodies beautiful—to make them ideal. His words describe his goal this way: “. . .to shape a people for self respect

⁵ This is not to suggest that his vision of the “ideal” black humanity ever came to fruition, just that he recognized and was sensitive that many of the prevailing discourses that constituted and gave meaning to the black “race” were negative. By re-imagining black bodies, symbolic and social, religious and physical, Muhammad was also dislocating and critiquing as such fields of “knowledge.” See, Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

⁶ See, Edward E. Curtis, IV, “Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12.2 (2002): 167-96, in which he seems to argue that this “Islamized” black body represented all black people for the NOI.

and universal recognition.”⁷ And the NOI rituals and ideas were the raw materials of which the visionary Muhammad corporealized or embodied African American Muslims of the NOI. One theoretical observation is in order, however. Namely, it seems necessary to distinguish between the practices of the NOI in that they appear to vary depending on which body, biochemical or symbolic, was the intended referent of the benefit or meaning of the practice in question.

E. U. Essien-Udom, author of the misnomered *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*⁸ offers a rudimentary nomenclature that may assist us in entering the conversation about the foundational elements of embodiment—what he calls “exoteric” and “esoteric” religious teachings of the NOI.⁹ Although he gives us very few examples of what he means by the designations, the terms are helpful in differentiating between practical and discursive elements that are used in constructing and bestowing meaning upon black bodies.

⁷ Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS, 1993), 43.

⁸ E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). The text is “misnomered” because it is ostensibly about black nationalist theory, but it actually a book about the NOI which is limited in what it reveals by the fact that its framework is social and political thought that fails to recognize the NOI fully as a religious group.

⁹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 8-9.

Below, one category is labeled “exoteric praxis” to emphasize the ritual and practical nature of the more overt and public “teachings” that will come under this heading, and likewise the other is designated “esoteric principles” to communicate that these often surreptitious and private teachings are primarily discursive. Regarding Essien-Udom’s binary, he says of exoteric forms:

The exoteric forms of the religion stem directly from Muhammad’s attempt to cope with the social, cultural, and psychological environment in which the Negro finds himself [*sic*]. They offer the believer a set of incentives and a definite discipline which enable him to transcend the common plight and degradation of the Negro masses, and they impart to the movement an active, cohesive, and expanding existence. . . . Muhammad’s exoteric teachings emphasize the techniques for attaining the good life in the ‘sweet here and now’ and not in the ‘sweet bye and bye.’ Heaven and hell are thought to be ‘two conditions on earth which reflect one’s state of mind, his moral conditions and actions.’¹⁰

What is indicated here is the concern for the existential and biological realities of black bodies, and implied is a regiment of practices that allow African Americans not only to distinguish themselves from other black bodies but also to cope with the psychological and physical stressors that are part of living a life that is characterized by oppression, such as physical ailments.

¹⁰ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 8.

Esoteric or religious teachings, on the other hand, may help to explain the religious behavior of the NOI, in that they provide the theoretical and theological foundation for understanding the ethos of NOI culture. Also important are the ways in which the speculative aspects of the NOI help to give coherence and meaning to the daily lives of the Muslims. Essien-Udom, cautions, however, that they alone do not account for the dedication of the NOI to their regimen of practices:

However, the religious teachings of Muhammad do not fully explain the behavior patterns of the Muslims. *Esoteric* in nature, centered upon eschatological and apocalyptic hopes, they are too removed from the present realities of the Muslims' lives to account for the sincerity of their daily practices, their ethical and cultural prescriptions. Although extremely important as a psychological factor of unity and hope, they must be distinguished from the *exoteric* teachings of Muhammad, with which they of course interact.¹¹

Again, he notes that esoteric teachings function in part to create a sense of unity in the NOI, and I would add that inherent in this solidarity is the distinction between NOI black bodies and black bodies generally. Furthermore, he maintains that such teachings are more ethereal and symbolic in nature since they concern the attainment of the good life in the "sweet bye and bye."

The reader will note, first, that "praxis" and "principle" both may involve elements of the other and that they are not discrete and, second, that placement of practices into one or the other category, therefore, may not be without discrepancies,

¹¹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 8.

given the subjectivity involved in the designations. Various practices or discourses are ascribed to the appropriate category based on my informed discretion.

What this chapter suggests is that the descriptions of Essien-Udom's exoteric and esoteric designations above correspond roughly to the body as the material locus of the self and the body as a symbol of the collective, respectively. In other words, the nomenclature gives us a helpful way of conceptualizing and framing the practices, which we can associate with Muhammad's particular bodily interest and to examine how those practices varied given such particularized concern, in his endeavor to valorize the body—both physical and symbolic. Having said this, what follows are only meant to be brief descriptions of the factors involved in the making and meaning of black bodies in the NOI, not an exhaustive ritual and theoretical analysis.

Exoteric Praxis and the Body as Material Reality:

Vibrancy, Health, and Cleanliness

Dietary Regulations

One of the more well documented ritual practices are the dietary codes, which are significant both for the physical body and for the body as a symbol of the collective culture, given that for in *How to Eat to Live*,¹² he links them both to biological health and wellness and to “spiritual beauty,” which imply his concern for constructing the ideal black nation, since in reference to the food regulations, “We achieve the spiritual beauty

¹² E.g., Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 102-3.

through practicing or carrying into practice the spiritual laws.”¹³ Dietary codes are placed here as exoteric, not arbitrarily, but because, although they are religious regulations that come from Allah, they are not necessarily private practices, and according to Muhammad, the primary purpose of them is to promote the health, beauty, and longevity of the physical body:

There is no way for us to learn the right way to eat in order to live a long life, except through the guidance and teachings of Allah, Who came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad. The Bible says that He will give us more life abundancy, but He demands strict obedience to His Will. There is no way of prolonging the life of human beings—or any other life—unless it begins with restrictions of the foods which sustain life: the right kinds of food and the proper time when it should be taken into our bodies.¹⁴

A few observations are in order here. First, Muhammad maintains that knowledge of a diet that would prolong life can only come from Master Fard Muhammad, because as God, he would have indispensable and infallible information about such things as the workings and functions of the body, having created them. Second, it follows that the only means of obtaining this beneficial knowledge is through strict adherence to the teachings and laws of the NOI, which in his language is obedience to Allah. Finally, the most significant laws begin with the physical body as a means of breaking social control

¹³ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 102.

¹⁴ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 1.

previously exerted over black bodies through white domination and as a means of asserting his own ritual authority over such bodies.

The dietary laws regulate the types of food that NOI members can consume, when and how often they are to eat, how they are to prepare foods, and what they cannot eat. They represent ostensibly¹⁵ the strictest control of physical bodies in the NOI. Muhammad maintains: “Hereafter, I shall enforce restriction on my followers to eat as Allah bids us.”¹⁶ Elsewhere he states likewise: “The eating regulations in this book are a ‘must’ with my followers. Begin at once—eat only one meal a day, regardless of the work you are doing.”¹⁷

Of great interest in Muhammad’s *How to Eat to Live*, Books One and Two and *Message to the Blackman in America*,¹⁸ are the foods that are prohibited and the ways in

¹⁵ Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*.

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 169ff. I suggest that the strict ritual control was ostensible because as Curtis points out evidence suggests that members adhered differentially to ritual control in the NOI, choosing for themselves which rituals to ignore and which to follow. In that sense, Muhammad was naïve in his determination to “enforce restrictions” on his followers.

¹⁶ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 2-3.

¹⁷ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 8.

¹⁸ E.g., Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1965), 17. See also, Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 205-6; Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 98-109.

which perhaps the strictest regulations are directed at female bodies.¹⁹ First, in what can also be read as concern for the physical body and for the negative meaning that the black body carries in society, Muhammad restricted from the NOI diet foods that he associated with slavery²⁰ such as collard and turnip greens, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, pork (especially chitterlings or ‘chitlins’),²¹ corn bread, chicken, grits, and so on,²² suggesting: “Eating the wrong food and eating it too often starts trouble in the physical body

¹⁹ See Stephen C. Finley and Margarita L. Simon, “‘That Girl Is Poison’: White Supremacy, Anxiety, and the Conflation of Women and Food in the Nation of Islam,” in *Women and Religion in the World*, vol. 7, ed. Darnise T. Martin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Forthcoming). The authors argue that, not only do the dietary codes function to locate the black female body, including what women eat, menstruation, and birth control, under the subordination and control of men, in response to the NOI’s masculine insecurity vis-à-vis white supremacy, they also dislodge women from symbolically and “spiritually” superior positions *qua* women who relate most “naturally” to a male God in a heteronormatively fixed cosmology.

²⁰ See, Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 17.

²¹ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 103: “Stay away from the hog, of which 10 ounces takes away from you, God has said, three one-hundredths per cent of beauty appearance.”

²² See, for example, Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 4-6, 63, 90f, 109. Cf. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 98.

everywhere—from the sole of your feet to the crown of your head.”²³ And NOI members should only eat one meal a day.²⁴ It seems that the type of diet prescribed here is important because of the social implications of such a diet—the foods described above are “slave foods” that were later re-inscribed in African American culture as “soul food” as many black people moved into the middle classes and wanted to maintain a black identity, most strongly associated with such a diet.²⁵

Maybe the most important reason for recommending this diet, especially anti-pork, as opposed to one such as vegan, however, was that the required diet here helped to differentiate between NOI bodies and the deplorable black bodies *in-place* which were epitomized by so-called Negro Christians (see Chapter Two).²⁶ Muhammad remarks:

The taking of the prohibited flesh of the swine as food is beyond righteous imagination. . . They are so fond of swine flesh that they sacrifice it in the church, and then ask divine blessings upon it. They barbeque and cook it, and hold a feast in their places of worship and eat this slow-death poisonous animal—which God has forbidden—as though they had an option with God. . . Preachers and priests are working along with the enemy, or adversary, of God, teaching the people that it is all right to eat swine—their bellies stretched with

²³ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 41.

²⁴ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book Two, 4-6; 85.

²⁵ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 107.

²⁶ Witt, *Black Hunger*, 107.

the hog in them and saturated with the whiskey and wine. This is the type of religion under which you have been brought—Christianity and its preachers and priests. None of them have tried to prevent you from breaking this divine law by teaching you the consequences of such an act.²⁷

It is clear that Muhammad is attempting to create a discrete distinction between the practices of Christianity, which he understands to mean “white” (see Chapter Two) and those of his followers, obviously privileging the latter and condemning the former. He indicates that their dietary habits work in service of whites, “the enemy, or adversary of God.” He also intimates that these people who are complicit with whites are indeed black clergy, given that these “preachers and priests” work along with whites in advocating consumption of the hog. Moreover, note that in addition to the Negro preacher, Muhammad may implicate African American Catholic clergy, the “priests,” as complicit in this unholy conspiracy, appealing to a caricature of the black preacher as an immoral and drunken buffoon whose belly is “stretched with the hog in them and saturated with whiskey and wine.”

Second, women’s bodies are brought under the ultimate “control” of men via the dietary codes, which were of course divinely decreed by a man (i.e., Allah), and which are overseen by men who are the established heads of NOI households. This includes issues of childbirth, birth control, and child nursing.²⁸ Here, Muhammad conflates food

²⁷ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 13.

²⁸ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 67, 81-6; Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book Two, 89-90, 118, 179.

intake and control over one's body to male control of women's bodies. Muhammad says, for instance:

It is a disgrace upon us black people of America to permit ourselves and our future generations to be cut off and destroyed by ignorant, foolish, pleasure-seeking girls and women of our own who do not know what they are doing when they swallow the birth control pill. I repeat: If you accept Allah (God) and follow me and if you give birth to 100 children, each of you girls and women is [*sic*] considered more blessed and right in the eyes of Allah (God) than those who try to kill the birth seed.²⁹

Muhammad makes similar statements about birth control and the control of black women's bodies in *Message to the Blackman in America*.³⁰ Often, this bodily control is advocated under the guise of "protecting" and "elevating" black women. According to Muhammad:

Our women have been and still are being used by the devil white race, ever since we were first brought here to these States as slaves. They cannot go around without being winked at, whistled at, yelled at, slapped, patted. . . You do nothing about it, nor do you even protest. You cannot control or protect your women. . .³¹

²⁹ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 85.

³⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 64-5.

³¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 60.

In this instance, black women's bodies have to be regulated to protect black men and the reproduction of the black nation through her. The white man is constructed as a lustful rival who desires the bodies of black women:

He stands before the so-called Negro woman to deceive here by feigning love and love-making with her; give the so-called Negro woman preference over her husband or brother in hiring. . . In some cities, the Negro woman receives much higher salary than the so-called Negro man. The devil takes the so-called Negro woman and puts his hands and arms around here body...³²

The bodies of black women are not viewed as their own, but rather, as sites of contestation between black and white men. White men, he argues, pretend to love black women in order to have sexual intercourse with them. As a reward or an incentive, he suggests, white men, whom he sees in dominant corporate positions offer black women jobs that are superior to those of African American men, thus circumventing the natural order of gendered relations that privilege men. Muhammad goes on to suggest that the behavior of white men and black women is threatening to black men because it is an "outright destruction of the moral principles of the black man."³³ Black women's bodies are seen as an extension of black men, and women's bodies are not their own but belong to their husbands or men in authority over them.³⁴

³² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 127.

³³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 127.

³⁴ As such, the idea of white men having sexual intercourse with black women could illicit anxieties about homosexuality or black men being dominated and entered sexually

Again, some of this concern for controlling women's bodies may be due to the perception that the social and biological reproduction of African American communities were at risk due to the rise in social status of black women and the resulting close proximity to white men. Implied above is that black (male) bodies are to be strong and able to withstand and repel the sexual advances of white men, in part through strict control of black women, which can also help to explain the importance of women black homemakers in the NOI, rather than as domestics in white households where they might be susceptible to the advances of whites and other men. It seems logical, then, that Muhammad expresses this concern in the context of dietary laws, since an important facet appears to be the establishment of bodily and social control over his members.

Additional aspects of food regulations offer details for attaining purity, cleanliness, and health of the physical body and prohibitions against the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.³⁵ These practices were meant to prolong life as much as one hundred years to more than a thousand years (see also Chapter Two), in a life in which black life expectancy was considerably lower than for whites.³⁶ In addition, these codes communicate that ideal black bodies are to be healthy, robust, and long living. This also implies that they are to be distinctive bodies—different both from white bodies and from black bodies *in-place*.

by white men, if black men see black women as extensions of their own bodies or as their property.

³⁵ For example, Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 2, 19-21.

³⁶ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book One, 19, 52-3, 80-1.

Naming

Another means of distinguishing and valorizing these bodies is through the practice of naming. The ritual of naming serves an important function in the NOI as it marks physical black bodies with new religious identities. Essien-Udom suggests that NOI members, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, are given a new name after writing a letter requesting membership in the NOI and a terse indoctrination in the form of required lessons that:

Upon completion of the required number of lessons, a believer who is found to meet an additional test of reliability is accepted as a registered Muslim and is given a name. The member drops his last name and any middle initials. In place of these, the Messenger of Allah assigns to him a certain number of X or some other symbol.³⁷

This “X” as in Malcolm X or Louis X, as Farrakhan was once known (see Chapter Six), is said by Muhammad to stand for the unknown name since African Americans were given slave names and lost their authentic African or Muslim names, just as in an algebraic equation X can represent an unidentified quantity. This new name indicates the accomplishment of other spatio-political prerequisites that include regular attendance at temple services.

Naming is an important ritual in the construction of black bodies that, along with the other rituals and discourses of the NOI, distinguish them from other black bodies in the culture. Naming or self-signification is also a form of resistance—a counter

³⁷ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 203.

movement to the practice of stripping Africans of their cultural names and giving them the names of their European and American enslavers and endowing black bodies with the oppressive meanings of Western hegemony.³⁸ In this way, the NOI announces the reclamation of a body that once belonged physically, culturally, and ideologically to whites through slavery. Naming marks physical bodies as having undergone specific religious practices in order to be seen as worthy members of the Nation (see Chapter Six). According to Richard Brent Turner, author of *Islam in the African American Experience*:

Clearly, the issue of naming is crucial to the formation of black identity in North America. Unlike white Americans, African Americans, who were involuntarily taken away from their land of origin, have been stripped of their genealogy and history. For these Americans to reclaim a cultural identity, they must not only reject the names imposed upon them by their former slave masters or chosen from a European repertoire, but also create new names that signify new identities. Since the colonial era, Islam has provided black Americans with alternate names and identities.³⁹

Turner indicates the importance of naming for persons who have been colonized or whose communities have been colonized, named, and othered. Taking a new name, for Muhammad, then, signifies “salvation,” but leaves ambiguous the nature of such salvation, stating simply that receiving the name of Allah “alone is enough to save

³⁸ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.

³⁹ Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 1.

you.”⁴⁰ He proposes that “slave” names are part of the tripartite evil that keeps African Americans from authentic freedom, stating, “Our first step is to give back to the white man his religion (Christianity), his church, and his names. These three are chains of slavery that hold us in bondage to them. We are free when we give up the above three.”⁴¹ Along these same lines, Muhammad advises that names have the power to keep black bodies enslaved “in the eyes of the civilized world today.”⁴² Soteriological in nature, he indicates not only that naming is a sign of a body that has been reclaimed he indicates that the fact of naming (by the NOI) is efficacious for salvation and respect of the body.

As an example of the effects of naming on black bodies Muhammad cites naming for changing the life of Muhammad Ali, one of his most famous proselytes. He takes credit for Ali’s success in boxing and his international stature:

The example was evident when I took Muhammad Ali (the World’s Heavyweight Champion) out of the white man’s name (the name that itself made him a servant and slave to the white man). All of Africa and Asia then acclaimed him as also being their champion. This shows you that all the previous black men of America who were bestowed with the title of world’s heavyweight champion were only exalting the white man of America, Europe and Australia. .

⁴⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 19.

⁴¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 26.

⁴² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 43.

. Just a change of name has given Brother Muhammad Ali a name of honor and a name of praise that will live forever (its meaning).⁴³

Muhammad suggests that black men who were champions before Ali were only giving glory to white men, whose names they carried. This signifying denotes bodies that belong to a new order of meaning, one that is beautiful and not associated with the nomenclatures that the dominant culture has previously ascribed to them. For Muhammad, naming is part of a larger project in the contest over the identity of black bodies—which accordingly were not “colored” or “Negro” as the dominant culture had designated them.⁴⁴ As such, Master Fard’s name is paradigmatic for Muslims in that he is God, and as an example, his name designates beauty: “His name, Fard Muhammad [and ‘Great Mahdi’], is beautiful in its meaning.”⁴⁵

Dress Codes

Furthermore, the adornment of physical bodies in ways that identity them as members of the black nation also falls within the purview of Muhammad’s regulations and attempted bodily control of NOI members. Thus, the NOI has prescribed dress codes for male and female members. Women, whose dress regulations take on a moral tone as opposed to male codes, are not allowed to use cosmetics, mechanically alter their hair through chemicals or heat, and must wear clothing that indicates their modesty. Muhammad comments:

⁴³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 43.

⁴⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 34.

⁴⁵ Muhammad, *History of Jesus*, 54.

We must stop our women, at once, from imitating the white race, from trying to look other than their own kind, by bleaching, powdering, ironing and coloring their hair, painting their lips, cheeks, eyebrows, wearing shorts, going half-nude in public and going swimming on beaches with men.⁴⁶

Like with dietary codes, Muhammad again associates forbidden practices with white bodies, of whom the practice of cosmetology are meant to imitate. At the same time, it is conspicuous that he only chastises women, when black men also made mechanical alterations of their bodies such as bleaching their skin and straightening their hair, arguably in imitation of white men.

Muhammad admonishes women, not men, against going half-naked in public and rather observing modesty. Essien-Udom observations concur. He asserts that “They do not wear lipstick or conspicuous cosmetics. The headtie is required for all Sisters.”⁴⁷ Curtis also notes the gendered set of rules regarding adornment, and that women “were to dress modestly and avoid makeup.”⁴⁸ Dressing modestly generally resulted in women wearing a head covering and long dresses with long sleeves.⁴⁹ Men’s clothing did not carry the negative stigma of needing to cover up their bodies for moral and social reasons. Instead, men generally wore dark business suits⁵⁰ and sometimes bowties.

⁴⁶ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume 2, 56-7.

⁴⁷ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 207.

⁴⁸ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 109.

⁴⁹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 207.

⁵⁰ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 109.

Education and Discipline

Similarly, men's and women's bodies are disciplined separately and differently with respect to gendered education and training. The primary men's auxiliary was called the Fruit of Islam or FOI. Here, men are trained in martial arts, security, precision drill, proselytizing,⁵¹ physical and mental cleanliness, and "military" training, including deference for the male power hierarchy. In his own words, Muhammad defines the "Fruit of Islam":

The Fruit of Islam means the first converts to Islam here in America and the first people to be cleaned and made fit to be called Muslims. And their training is on this basis, as being Muslims, to keep in practice, not just say in their faith or belief. You must put into practice the principles of Islam that you believe in and serve as an example for others who would accept Islam. They take physical training and exercises in many ways to keep physically fit and healthy and to try to get away from many of the physical ailments that they have suffered long before coming into the knowledge of Islam.⁵²

Muhammad sees physical exercises of men in the FOI as an important aspect of NOI religion. At this point, we see Muhammad's continued concern for aesthetics and beauty, in that healthy, masculine, and disciplined bodies are of utmost importance. To that end, homosexuality is not tolerated in the NOI.

⁵¹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 191.

⁵² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 321.

From the perspective of the NOI, homosexuality, that is actual same-sex romantic relationships, preclude the cleanliness and discipline that they advocate, despite the fact that NOI auxiliaries are homosocial. In fact, gay and lesbian relationships for Muhammad are “filthy” practices that indicate criminality and the lack of discipline in schools, especially given that schools are co-educational rather than organized along strict gender lines. Muhammad asserts:

The freedom of uncleanness [in America] is granted and is worshiped. The percentage of sexual worship of the same sex is greater than in any other government on the face of the earth. Little children are being taught sex almost from the cradle, making the whole nation, as one man put it 90 per cent freaks of nature. On the streets of any metropolitan city in America, it is common to see men sweethearting with men and women sweethearting with women. Little boys with boys and little girls with girls. It is so common that a decent family is puzzled as to where to send their children for schooling. They are all-girls schools of sweethearts. The same sex falling upon their own. Boys’ colleges are breeding such filthy practices, the jails, prisons, and the Federal Penitentiaries are breeding dens of homosexuals.⁵³

The lack of discipline in part characterized by integration results in such filth as homosexuality—so strongly associated with America, in the mind of Muhammad, that it is worshiped by many. These practices are “unclean” and like the Sodomites, will lead to

⁵³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 277.

plagues of death and famines.⁵⁴ Such “filth” and “uncleanliness” is, in part, a result of so-called freedom in America, which he tacitly suggests will not be the case with his members.⁵⁵

That said, emphasis is placed on the proper conduct, discipline, and order of men and women. For men, strict adherence to male leadership is required. Hence, the FOI leader of individual temples is called the captain, and the national security leader is the Supreme Captain, a title that connotes authority and discipline.⁵⁶ One of the most powerful positions in the NOI, the Supreme Captain had the power to impose ritual disciplinary measures on members.⁵⁷ The ritualized nature of the FOI practices make give it religious importance:

Many of their activities were ritualized, including their dress, forms of salute, and drill routines. While the official uniform of the FOI changed at various points throughout the 1960s and 1970s, members often wore either a dark suit and bow tie or a military-like outfit that included a fez and a three-button coat with small lapels and stripes across the ends of the sleeves.”

⁵⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 277-8.

⁵⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 277.

⁵⁶ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 136-7.

⁵⁷ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 233. Muhammad’s Supreme Captain was his son in law Raymond Sherrieff.

FOI education, dress, and disciplines are meant to make “men out of boys,”⁵⁸ in the sense that they emphasize masculinity, power, and domination. Muhammad contends, however, that the FOI functions primarily to discipline bodies and secondarily for self-defense and security.⁵⁹ Essien-Udom declares that “protection” of black “womanhood” is part of the ideology and practice of the FOI, which he erroneously calls the “Fruits” of Islam.⁶⁰ This further emphasizes the importance of the relationship between men and women in the NOI and implies a critique of homosexuality, in that men in the discourses and practices are always juxtaposed to those of women and are parallel and complimentary.

The corresponding organization for women and girls in which womanhood was constructed, for instance, was called Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class⁶¹ or MGT-GCC. To an extent, MGT-GCC reinforces male dominance given the domestic and obsequious nature of its disciplines. Muhammad illustrates this contention:

⁵⁸ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 138.

⁵⁹ Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1993), 21.

⁶⁰ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 150, 157.

⁶¹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 157. Here again, Essien-Udom erroneously refers to MGT-GCC as “Moslem” (rather than “Muslim”) Girls Training and General Course in Civilization.

The Muslim girls of our Nation should spare no effort to learn their special duties and responsibilities as future wives and mothers. The University of Islam in Chicago and Detroit are both equipped to give them the finest training in their special fields. Those who are unable to attend one of these schools should take advantage of the instruction available in the Temple of Islam M. G. T. (Muslim Girls' Training) classes.⁶²

MGT-GCC was organized along the same lines as FOI, says Essien-Udom, except, as noted above, the education and training was divided along traditional gendered lines. For instance, women and girls learn how to cook, rear children, take care of their husbands, sew, keep tidy homes, and keep their bodies clean.⁶³ Security is the one area that offers male and female bodies visibility in which their recalcitrance and agency are on public display in an ostensible show of equality, given that the MGT-GCC, like the FOI, conducts searches of the bodies and properties of female attendants of NOI events.⁶⁴

Prayer

An additional vital ritual that is significant for the body as material reality is the prayer service, in that import is placed on bodily comportment including cleanliness, posture, and language. Essien-Udom recognized prayer as an important ritual but erred in

⁶² Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume 2, 58.

⁶³ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 157-8. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 146-53.

⁶⁴ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 214-5.

his contention that the prayer service was the only religious ritual in NOI praxis,⁶⁵ concluding:

There is virtually no religious ceremony or ritual at Temple meetings except the prayers said at the opening and closing of meetings and perhaps a verse or two read by the minister from the Koran or from the Bible during the course of his lecture.⁶⁶

His failure to recognize the ritual and religious nature of NOI praxis and principles is due in part to his lack of understanding of the NOI as a religious organization, since he interprets the organization not by the theories and methods of that constitute the field of religious studies, which are themselves multidisciplinary, but rather opts for a theory of black nationalism, which obfuscates the religious nature of the movement.⁶⁷ In fact, such an approach seems only to allow him to interpret the group as a sociopolitical movement. Curtis makes similar observations, noting that there are numerous examples of behavior and circumstances which Essien-Udom mentions in his detailed *oeuvre* that “many

⁶⁵ It is likely that he is following the same errant conclusions of C. Eric Lincoln, who’s *The Black Muslims in America* was published a year earlier.

⁶⁶ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 214.

⁶⁷ See, Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 1-82, in which the first two chapters are on the history and theory of black nationalism. He then locates the NOI in that tradition in chapter three by attempting to connect black nationalism to NOI history and demonstrate that it is a mere extension of a coherent stream that existed in America since the early nineteenth century.

contemporary students of religious studies would view as religious ceremony and ritual.”⁶⁸

Indeed, the prayer service was a religious ceremony in which participants engaged in various public and private practices. The private aspects of it are meant to develop one’s inner self, suggests Muhammad.⁶⁹ The public aspect should be performed in a congregation, preferably in a Mosque.⁷⁰ As part of the service, members perform an ablution ritual in which they wash parts of their bodies in preparation for prayer.

Muhammad explains:

We see him turning himself to Allah to recite the prayer of the righteous... We see him washing his hands and all the exposed parts of his body. We see him washing his face, his eyes, his ears, mouth and nose and even those we hands go over his head to clean the very scalp. . . He is now ready for the prayer service of the Nation of Islam and to recite the oft-repeated prayer.⁷¹

While understood as a religious obligation,⁷² the meanings of these acts are morally based and suggest the desire for purity and literal cleanliness of the body in the life of the

⁶⁸ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 161. See also, Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body, 173, in which he challenges Essien-Udom’s claims.

⁶⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 138.

⁷⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 138.

⁷¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 144.

⁷² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 135.

worshiper.⁷³ Of course, “Many believers associated Islamic religion with what might be called proper etiquette, clean living, and the care of one’s body.”⁷⁴ Bodily cleanliness is analogous to religious purity.

Bodily posture is also meant to communicate something positive about the body and the spiritual life of the believer—standing erect signifies moral righteousness, for example:

The prayer is recited standing erect with face towards the east with hands raised declaring to the one God, Allah, that he has turned himself to Allah (God) the originator of the heavens and earth. This prayer and positions are especially designed and worded for those lost sheep (the so-called Negroes) who have been lost from the knowledge of their God and people and now declare that they are turned again to their God, Allah, and are upright to him.⁷⁵

Ultimately, the rituals all have a theologically aesthetic function as Muhammad indicates:

“A well-educated, cultured and courteous people make a beautiful society when it is spiritual.”⁷⁶ But even in this ritual, special consideration has to be given to women for them to receive the full benefits of the positive meaning that it affords bodies. In her case, her body must be covered, for “Allah accepts not the prayers of a woman arrived at

⁷³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 148-52.

⁷⁴ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 27.

⁷⁵ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 137.

⁷⁶ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 44.

puberty unless she covers her head as well as her whole body.”⁷⁷ Muhammad does not elaborate or suggest why this covering is necessary for women. One can only conjecture that the covering marks a woman’s body as inferior in status to men.

Esoteric Principles and the Body as a Symbol of the Collective:

Yakub, the Mother Plane, and Transcendent Blackness

The aforementioned indicates Muhammad’s concern for the physical body, but as intimated earlier he privileged the symbolic aspects of NOI religion over the material ones—that is, bodies are constructed in accordance with the theological, cosmological, and mythological foundations of the religious assembly. At this point, we seek to advance the thesis that the ideal black body in the NOI gained its ultimate meaning and importance from discursive aspects of the religion. In short, discourses such as the Yakub myth and the mother plane reveal the black body’s true nature as cosmic, mystical-esoteric, and ultimate—in short, transcendent.

Through transcendence, the NOI was able to construct bodies whose meanings were not of this evil and racist world or time, despite their apparent materiality. Curtis uses the term “supralocative” to describe an element of what is meant here by transcendence. By this, he means that the NOI historical narratives locate the origins of the black race “beyond the boundaries of this-worldly space.”⁷⁸ While this is helpful, it encompasses only an aspect of what is meant here by transcendence. In addition to the

⁷⁷ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 143.

⁷⁸ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 71.

trans-historical and trans-geographical implications inherent in his notion of supralocative, transcendence will also signify the idea that the disclosure of the ultimate significance and meaning of “this-worldly space” will be revealed by entities that exist beyond earthly bounds.

It is this apocalyptic denouement that will end the present age (*ad-dunya*) and reveal the truth. This does not pose a conflict with the NOI’s earthbound theology, however. Rather, transcendence through cosmic and esoteric ideas gives coherence to an earthly existence that otherwise would be absurd, mundane, and terrifying. Similar to the aesthetics of Frank Burch Brown’s notion of “immanent transcendence”⁷⁹ in which the Divine is seen to be near a person and present in him or her, NOI esoteric religion is earthbound and material as the Divine lived among them in the person of Master Fard Muhammad; yet, in a sense, NOI bodies are themselves divine, cosmic—apotheosized.⁸⁰ By the early 1970s, indeed, “The Messenger had also began to move more toward Sufism and the notion that each man [*sic*] has the potential to be a god.”⁸¹ Such mystical dimensions, however, do not represent a later turn in Muhammad’s theology, since they were present from the beginning as seen in the narrative of Yakub (Chapter Two). The

⁷⁹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 128.

⁸⁰ See, Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume 2, 16, where he calls Negroes “Sacred Vessels” and Elijah Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam* (Chicago: Muhammad’s Temple No. 2, 1983), 22 where he refers to black people as “Gods of the Universe.”

⁸¹ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 367.

notion of ideal, sublime bodies was the ultimate means by which black bodies become beautiful in circumstances that would otherwise render them decrepit.

A paucity of scholarly literature exists on the NOI as an esoteric religion. For instance, Essien-Udom never defines esoteric. He simply points to eschatological and apocalyptic teachings as evidence of it. In so doing, the impression that he gives is that esoteric is a term that signifies things that are private and associated with end times teachings.⁸² Unfortunately, Curtis gives only cursory attention to the notion of NOI esotericism, though he offers more than Essien-Udom, stating that the NOI attempts to:

. . .communicate a set of seemingly secret teachings that evoke the larger tradition in African American and American religions of esotericism, a word used to describe various groups and persons who attempted to combine religion, science, and mystical teachings into one holistic understanding of the universe. In the NOI's schools, some students became master esotericists, offering their own interpretations of Elijah Muhammad's cryptic teachings, especially on the nature of time.⁸³

Curtis also intimates the belief of many NOI members that Muhammad had access to esoteric knowledge, "a kind of gnosis that paved the way for a perfect understanding of

⁸² Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 8.

⁸³ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 158.

the universe.”⁸⁴ With this tenuous statement, he helps us by illuminating an important aspect of esotericism, namely, that of gnosis or secret knowledge to which only the adepts who are connected to hidden and mystical sources have access.

Largely responsible for importing occultism and esotericism from Europe to America, Theosophy (“divine wisdom”) plays an important role in Western esoteric thought.⁸⁵ Parenthetically, journalist Karl Evanzz claims to document the relationship between Theosophy and the NOI founder, W. D. Fard Muhammad, in which Evanzz suggests that Fard, while residing in San Francisco, California, held one of his many memberships in religious and nationalistic organizations. Evanzz declares:

Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that Fard used yet another alias there, that of George Farr. According to ONI reports in late 1921, a man named George Farr got involved in the Theosophical Society, where he acted as an

⁸⁴ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 18. Cf. Lee, *The Nation of Islam, an American Millenarian Movement* (New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 138, for whom gnosis is a characteristic of millenarianism.

⁸⁵ The term “esoteric” was first introduced *circa* 166 C.E. by Lucian of Samosata, although it is often associated with Aristotle. The nomenclature was introduced into English in 1883 by A. D. Sinnet, a theosophist. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 384.

‘advanced man’ for Brahmin Mohini Chaterjee, the East Indian mystic.

Chaterjee’s benefactor was Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the society.⁸⁶

Notwithstanding, modern esotericism (mid-eighteenth century) is a movement in response to the secularization of nature and mechanistic worldviews. It is an alternate view of the world as “organic” and “a science based on religion assumptions”⁸⁷ that emphasizes secret knowledge and a special religious experience is accessible only by the elect.

Concerned with the synthesis of religion and science, esotericism is often syncretistic in nature,⁸⁸ which may help to explain the fluidity in the NOI with respect to the strong influences and elements of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, black nationalism, African American Christianity, Freemasonry, Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple (MSTA: which itself originated in Freemasonry), the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (i.e., the Jehovah’s Witnesses), scientific cosmology, and mathematics (*et al.*) that many scholars document in NOI thought.⁸⁹ It is

⁸⁶ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 402. Cf. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 73, where Clegg refers to “the theosophy of Fard Muhammad.”

⁸⁷ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 388.

⁸⁸ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 397.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Erdmann Doane Benyon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 43.6 (May 1938): 894-907; E. U. Essien-Udom. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 17-62, esp. 63; William A. Maesen. “Watchtower

interesting to note that, after the death of Noble Drew Ali, the founder of the MSTA in 1929, Master Fard Muhammad, claimed to be his reincarnation.⁹⁰ Like Dennis Walker, author of *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad*,

Influences on Black Muslim Eschatology: An Exploratory Study.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9.4 (Winter 1970): 321-5; Claude Andrew Clegg, III, *An Original Man The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 72-3; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 96, 118, 538 14n and 15n; Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of the End Time* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), esp. 178-229; Elijah Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry* (Atlanta: Secretarius MEMPS, 1994); Dennis Walker. *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005), 318, 405-6, 568.

⁹⁰ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 35-6. “However, Minister Malcolm X and other leaders of the Nation of Islam have emphatically denied any past connection whatsoever of Elijah Muhammad, Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, or their movement with Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish American Science Temple.” Cf. Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1993), 44, where Muhammad denies past membership in the MSTA. Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 65-9, says that Muhammad’s membership in the MSTA was definitive.

Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, contends: the NOI is built constructed “by many hands”⁹¹ or in the term of Claude Levi-Strauss, the NOI is a *bricolage*.⁹²

Muhammad claimed to have access to this esoteric knowledge regarding the nature of reality (i.e., metaphysics), God, and race, as did African Americans through him. He does not claim how he accesses this information, only that it comes from his relationship with Master Fard, the Great Mahdi, who taught him. He says, for instance:

The secret of who God is and who is the devil has been a mystery to the average one of mankind, to be revealed in all of its clearness to one who was so ignorant that he know [sic] not even himself—born blind, deaf and dumb. All praise is due to the Great Mahdi, who was to come and has come, the sole master of the worlds. I ask myself at times, ‘What can I do to repay Allah (the Great Mahdi, Fard Muhammad) for his coming, wisdom, and knowledge and understanding?’⁹³

Muhammad seems tacitly self-conscious about his own lack of formal education, and given this, he expresses gratitude for the gift of secret knowledge that Fard transmitted to him. In fact, he argues, Fard himself is hidden away in occultation,

⁹¹ Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 319. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 36, draws the same conclusion.

⁹² See, Claude Levi-Strauss. *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1-34.

⁹³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 52. Cf. Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 14, for a similar discourse that is verbatim in places to the one cited here.

like the expected Mahdi of Shi'ite Islam, until the time of his unveiling and judgment on the world. He comments: "Since His work is to destroy the wicked, He must remain hidden from the eyes of the world until the time is ripe (the end), for the two (God and devil) cannot rule together."⁹⁴ Simultaneously, the secret knowledge of Master Fard Muhammad is cloaked in the symbols of Freemasonry.⁹⁵ Claiming to have been a Mason and to have studied the science of masonry in the Congressional Library in Washington, D.C.,⁹⁶ he alleges that the white Masons do not understand the real truth of masonry.

Along this line of reasoning, he proclaims that the Masonic symbols on the Masons' attire point to the so-called Negro. "The fez represents the universe," he retorts.⁹⁷ "The Blackman made this fez. What I mean, the Sun, Moon and Star." Moreover, "We are the Square, and we are the Star, and we are the Moon."⁹⁸ "The white man knows nothing about the creation of such planets. This is why I teach you the theology of it."⁹⁹ Muhammad, also acknowledges the relationship between Islam in America and Freemasonry, stating: "Islam has been practiced in secrecy called

⁹⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 14.

⁹⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *The True History of Master Fard Muhammad* (Atlanta: Secretarius MEMPS, 2002), 9.

⁹⁶ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 15, 24.

⁹⁷ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 31.

⁹⁸ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 24.

⁹⁹ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 24.

Higher Masonry, Shriner, that is a small degree of knowledge of Islam is taught in secrecy by that society. You don't need to join Masonry to be a Muslim."¹⁰⁰ This is a tacit concession to the epistemological relationship between Freemasonry, the nature of reality, and the NOI that will be significant for Louis Farrakhan as we will see in Chapter Six. Also interesting is that the fez was a regular part of the NOI attire, particularly for the FOI.¹⁰¹

Without being specific as to what is the connection between the FOI,¹⁰² secret knowledge, and Freemasonry, Muhammad establishes an ambiguous link between the three:

The brothers, the Fruit of Islam (FOI) are men who have learned more about Masonry than you [i.e., white masons].¹⁰³ Your [NOI/black] masonry has included the history of your slavery, but you don't know it. Your first three degrees there, they are the answer to your slavery, if you understand. But not

¹⁰⁰ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 45. See page 10 where he conflates Masonry and Islam in terms of the nature of the Negro (i.e., born Muslim hence Masonic). It is also interesting to note that Muslim leadership titles like "Master," as in Master Fard Muhammad, and "Honorable," as in the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, are titles from Freemasonry.

¹⁰¹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 74.

¹⁰² Emphasis is mine.

¹⁰³ Emphasis is mine.

understanding them, as the white man would not teach you the theology inside of it, it makes you dumb to even that which you actually own.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, Muhammad fails to explain why, like with masonry, access to this secret knowledge appears to be gendered, given that his references to such are exclusively directed toward men. Men, such as the FOI, are privy to the symbolic and religious wisdom revealed in Masonic forms.

Hidden in the symbols and language of masonry, then, is the nature and origin of the cosmos, the “supreme wisdom” of which is the identity of Allah and the divine genesis of the black race.¹⁰⁵ To that end, Muhammad proclaims, “The Original Man, Allah has declared, is none other than the black man. He is the first and last, and maker and owner of the universe; from him come all—brown, yellow, red and white.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the knowledge that is embedded in masonry is most likely the disclosure of the history and origin of the black race, which is given discursive expression by

¹⁰⁴ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ In what are arguably the three most important texts on the theology of the NOI, Muhammad’s *Message to the Blackman in America* and *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volumes One and Two, the discourses privilege this order of information: the identity and nature of Allah and the divine origin of the black race.

¹⁰⁶ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, 14; An identical text appears in Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 53.

Muhammad in the many disjunctive discourses on Yakub.¹⁰⁷ This source, albeit concealed, suggests that all human life on the planet comes from the black race and that the black body therefore is the source and standard for humanity not the lowest form.

It is necessary to make some ruminations that bear directly on ideal the black bodies in the NOI. First, black bodies in the NOI are cosmic, according to the Yakub mythology, since their origin is interstellar, and they are related to beings on other planets. The previous chapter has already indicated the prevalence of this idea in NOI literature. However, *How to Eat to Live*, Book 2 offers an illustration which conflates the dietary codes and people on Mars with beautiful bodies:

WE ARE A LONG WAY off from the life of the people on Mars, Who Allah in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad, to Whom Praise is due forever, taught me, lived an average life of the equivalent of 1200 years of our earth calendar. This in fact has been the Original Nation's calendar year ever since God created the Heavens and the Earth, so teaches the Holy Qur-an. If you want a beautiful appearance, eat the proper food and eat one meal a day.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 2, 37n. The discipleship implications of the parts of the story of Yakub being located in various texts and reflecting hundreds of addresses over years by Elijah Muhammad suggests that to be immersed fully into the esoteric knowledge of the truth, one had to be a seeker of knowledge and a disciple, since no text appears to exist with an exhaustive accounting of the mythology of Yakub.

¹⁰⁸ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, Book 2, 7; Cf. 54.

The term “Original Nation” connects the people on Mars¹⁰⁹ with the NOI, the Lost-Found Tribe of Shabazz, whose origins are the same. Muhammad also indicates that the sense of time has been distorted on earth as it presently exists. In other words, one year for the Original People, prior to the “fall” or rebellion of Yakub, used to equal what is twelve-hundred earth years. The bodies of the black beings on Mars are physically superior and provide a model for what black bodies on earth can be.

Recall that Muhammad relished the idea of being related to “black” people on other planets, especially Mars. This is one of the important distinctions between the origins of black people and the made “white man.” White people are a small, limited group, while the black race is cosmic: “That’s the truth. You have people on Mars! Think how great you are. Ask the white man if he has any out there. We have life on other planets, but he don’t.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, black identity cannot be solely or properly constructed out of the experiences and racist discourses of the West. The true identity and meaning of black bodies lies in trillions of years of history prior to the existence of Europeans and Americans.

Still, albeit the people grow to be seven to nine feet tall and live for a thousand years or more, the people on Mars are still not the intellectually superior black people in the

¹⁰⁹ The people on Mars and other planets ended up there after Yakub exploded the earth.

The thirteenth tribe, the one called Shabazz, ended up on what is now known as the earth. See, Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 15.

¹¹⁰ Muhammad, *The True History*, 167-8. Cf. Muhammad, *History of the Nation*, 8; Muhammad, *Yakub*, 59.

universe, says Muhammad. African Americans “are the most intelligent beings in the universe.”¹¹¹ This body type again suggests the eminence of the symbolic over the physical for Muhammad, in this case, the black Martians offer an example of superior physical bodies, but he is well aware of the Western attacks of the black intellect as inferior, and as a counter to that he locates the superior consciousness here on earth. He remarks on how to recognize the true masters of the earth, indeed, the “Gods of the Universe”¹¹²:

Now it is so easy to recognize the Original Man, the real owner of the earth, by the history of the two (black and white) peoples. We have an unending past history of the black nation and a limited one of the white race. We find that history teaches that the [pre-explosion] earth was populated by the black nation ever since it was created, but the history of the white race doesn’t take us beyond 6,000 years. . . You might ask, who is this tribe of Shabazz? Originally, they were the tribe that came with the earth (or this part of it) sixty-six trillion years ago when a great explosion on our planet divided it into two parts. One we call earth, the other the moon.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Muhammad, *The Science of Time: The Time and Judgment When Self Tells the Truth on Self* (Atlanta: Secretarius MEMPS, 1993), 63.

¹¹² Elijah Muhammad, *The Flag of Islam* (Chicago: Muhammad’s Temple No. 2, 1983), 22.

¹¹³ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 15.

Their very existence symbolizing this cosmic reality, black bodies are not earthbound in their meaning but rather ultimate and originary, meaning that their cosmic genesis was the beginning of the human race. Accordingly, blackness is constituted as transcendent in NOI mythology since it is connected to the origin of the universe by way of the “Black God,”¹¹⁴ who created the cosmos.

A second aspect of the Yakub narrative that is noteworthy for the construction of ideal black bodies is the “racial” mythology of Master Fard Muhammad’s (Allah’s) identity. Master Fard has been described as phenotypically “white,”¹¹⁵ and while NOI mythology deems him literally and physically “black” though “light color,”¹¹⁶ some question his ambiguous ethnic background and wonder if he is “black” at all. Case in point, one newspaper article in the Chicago New Crusader (August 15, 1959) included a picture of Master Fard¹¹⁷ and printed in bold read letters the front page headline: “White Man Is God For Cult Of Islam.”¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, for Essien-Udom, Fard’s ethnic identity,

¹¹⁴ Elijah Muhammad, *Our Savior Has Arrived* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, n. d.), 39.

¹¹⁵ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 87.

¹¹⁶ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 43.

¹¹⁷ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 395, 414. Only a few pictures were known other than the prison pictures of Wallace Dodd Ford whom the FBI claims exposes Fard’s true identity. Elijah Muhammad owned one that the FBI confiscated. Evanzz says that the NOI had another picture that the Detroit Police took on May 26, 1933.

¹¹⁸ Cited in Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 315.

apparently accurately indicated by this “embarrassing expose,” seems a foregone conclusion: “We have noted already that Master Muhammad is by all standards a white person.”¹¹⁹ Claude A. Clegg, III, describes Fard as “a short, fair-skinned man with dark, straight hair [who presented himself as a “mulatto”¹²⁰], the Islamic instructor was difficult to distinguish from a white man yet appeared comfortable among large crowds of Detroit blacks.”¹²¹ Regardless of whether or not one could definitively establish Fard’s racial identity, the problem of his light complexion and “Caucasoid” features seemingly posed a problem for the NOI, even while identifying him as a Black God assisted in making blackness transcendent.

Muhammad and Fard, who reportedly narrates the story to him, responded in the NOI’s mythology by contending that Fard was strategically and intentionally of mixed black and white ancestry so that he would be able to mingle among white people to gather intelligence:

Who is His father if God is not His Father? God is His Father, but the Father is also a man. You have heard of old that God prepared a body, or the expected Son of Man; Jesus is a specially prepared man to do a work of redeeming the lost sheep (the so-called Negro). He [Fard Muhammad] had to have a body that would be part of each side (black and white), half and half. Therefore, being born or made from both people, He is able to go among both black and white

¹¹⁹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 315.

¹²⁰ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 22.

¹²¹ Clegg, *An Original Man*, 21.

without being discovered or recognized. This He has done in the person of Master W. F. Muhammad, the man who was made by His Father to go and search for the lost members of the Tribe of Shabazz.”¹²²

Muhammad never asks the obvious question: Does being born half white make Allah half Devil, since devils by nature “have no good in them?”¹²³ And how might this affect his divinity or power? Nor does he adequately explain how, being God, Master Fard was “born” of a “father” after being self-created and having created the cosmos. Rather, he simply appeals to traditional Christology, confident that by appealing to the analogy of Jesus, he could placate his NOI audience of former Christians,¹²⁴ who understood that Jesus could be man, God, and yet “born,” without serious challenge.

The matter that I wish to raise here is the relationship between Master Fard’s body as the paradigmatic divine black body and his light complexion. This aspect of the Yakub narrative also raises other relevant questions? For instance, the story maintains that

¹²² Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 19-20. See also, Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam*, 31-4; Elijah Muhammad, *The History of Jesus’ Birth, Death and What It Means*. . . (Atlanta, GA: Secritarius MEMPS Publications, 1993), 51.

¹²³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 24.

¹²⁴ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994), 25-6. Lincoln suggests that the majority of NOI members were “ex-Christians” or come from Christian homes in which their parents or grandparents were Christians.

Fard's mother was a white woman from the Caucasus Mountains¹²⁵ who was named Baby Gee. What if Fard's father was white and his mother was black? What problems would that have posed for a tradition that seems to understand the ideal body and the active processes of reproduction in male terms? Indeed, in a speech delivered in 1958, Muhammad locates the devil nature in Master Fard's mother, proclaiming: "The God cleaned her. Is that right? He stripped her of the devil and made her fit to give birth to a child, that he intends to use to go after his people to redeem that people from her people."¹²⁶ Elsewhere Muhammad elaborates:

It goes on also for the Mahdi being born out of His nation. But the man that produced the child, that she gave birth to was of us, Black man. He married her to get an unlike child so that he could send that child among our people and his people to produce a ruler of us who were lost among the unlike people. The man he made from among his people, and the enemy, was and is the God of judgment and destruction of the unlike people, who has attracted us for these last 6,000 years to follow them.¹²⁷

This aspect of the narrative bespeaks a concern both for the issue of complexion and gender in an apparent attempt to maintain the integrity of Fard's identity and divinity (Moses is also half white) and how whiteness has attracted black people (see Chapter

¹²⁵ Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam*, 4.

¹²⁶ Elijah Muhammad, *Birth of a Savior* (Chicago: The Coalition for the Remembrance of Elijah, 1993), 31.

¹²⁷ Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 9.

Two). Muhammad emphasizes that Fard was black and “was of us,” despite the obvious issues with his appearance. Ostensibly, Fard was half white in order to be able to gain intelligence about white communities without being detected as black.

Another phase of the Yakub story, in fact the culmination of the narrative, will bring into full realization the significance of black bodies, that is, the arrival of the Mother Plane, which will destroy this present world order and establish the new millennium in which black bodies will exist in their intended state in peace. An obvious question is: to whom will black bodies be revealed in all their glory? The texts are somewhat ambiguous on this point. In one place, however, Muhammad suggests that people will not only survive the judgment long enough to see the destruction that the Mother Plane (MP) brings on the old world, they will escape destruction:

Allah has warned us of how He would (one day) destroy the world with bombs, poison gas, and finally fire that would consume and destroy everything of the present world. Not anything of it (the present white mankind) would be left. Those escaping the destruction would not be allowed to take anything of it out with them. . . . Ezekiel saw it [the MP] a long time ago. It was built for the purpose of destroying the present world. Allah has also hinted at plaguing the world with rain, snow, hail and earthquakes.¹²⁸

Here, Muhammad’s words seem to conflict. On the one hand, bombs, fire, and gas will destroy the present world seemingly in an instance. On the other hand, the plagues of the MP would mean that many whites would witness the judgment, since rain, snow, hail,

¹²⁸ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 30.

and earthquakes would not likely destroy the world immediately. That enemy witnesses would survive to see the glory of the truth of black bodies is indicated in his suggestion that some would escape destruction. Who these individuals are and how they would survive remains unarticulated.

Muhammad does indicate that his desire is for whites to recognize the uniqueness and ultimacy of black bodies. He suggests that black bodies will take new meaning when the New World comes into being and that whites will learn the truth of the religion of Allah, pointing to the continued existence of an undefined representation of them:

The so-called Negroes will be the beneficiaries (of the New World), for they, too, will be made “New” by Allah. They will take on new growth—spiritual as well as physical—and will become the most beautiful, the most wise, the most powerful and the most progressive people that ever lived!... The White Christians think that they and their religion will be the rulers in the New World. Followers of other religions think the same. But they will be greatly surprised and disappointed, for Allah has rejected all religions except Islam.¹²⁹

Muhammad announces that black bodies as both biological and black bodies as religious symbols of the collective will be changed and unveiled as the greatest and most beautiful, powerful, and intelligent bodies ever to exist, and he stipulates that whites will behold this revelation—much to their chagrin. They, he argues, are expecting that Christianity will be the religion of the new millennium.

¹²⁹ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume Two, 32.

The MP variously called the Mother Ship and the Mother Wheel (see Chapter Six) is of utmost importance for the ideal black body in that it reveals it in all its glory—brings it into fruition and imbues it with all of its cosmic, transcendent, and divine meaning. Muhammad's idea of the MP is derived from a literal reading of Ezekiel 1 in which the prophet experienced a *visio Dei* in the form of a “space” vehicle, described as a wheel within a wheel.¹³⁰ According to Muhammad, the MP is a military weapon that Allah will use to judge America and the world for its horrific treatment, lynchings,¹³¹ and enslavement of black people:

But America brought this woe upon herself, by not doing Justice to her Black slaves. . . Allah (God) wants to pay America for her injustice to we, the poor Black man in America, the Black slave! . . . America has not received much woe yet, for how she killed outright, the poor Black man in the south (GA). America has hated her Black slave worse than she hates rattlesnakes. America has given her Black slave every evil and indecent name that she could think of while yet her Black slave has been her safety ground.¹³²

Moreover, the MP is a vehicle of justice, that will not only destroy the devil and the evil present world, it will usher in the a millennial reign and peace on the earth for the Black

¹³⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 290.

¹³¹ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 131. Lynchings were a “commonplace occurrence” for Elijah Muhammad.

¹³² Elijah Muhammad, *The Mother Plane* (Maryland Heights, MO: Secretarius MEMPS, 1992), 16-7.

Nation (i.e, black, brown, red, yellow)¹³³ whose bodies will be transformed into their perfect state:

There will be such a charge in the general atmosphere of the earth (in the Hereafter) that people will think it is a new earth. It will be the heaven of righteousness forever; no sickness, no hospitals, no insane asylums, no gambling, no cursing or swearing will be heard in that life. . . You will be clothed in silk, interwoven with gold, and eat the best food that you desire. This is the time when you enter such life, for your God is here in Person...¹³⁴

In preparation for this millennial existence and as evidence of its possibility, Muhammad demands that his followers adopt a moral and courageous lifestyle immediately: “All fear, grief and sorrow will stop on this side as a proof,”¹³⁵ in short, he desires an ethic of proper conduct.

As a metaphor for beautiful black bodies, the MP discloses the racial genius of the black race—a brilliance which heretofore has been suppressed and hidden from the world in service of white domination and oppression. Intentionally gendered as feminine because it carries in its core other planes¹³⁶:

¹³³ Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 25, 27.

¹³⁴ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume One, 25-6.

¹³⁵ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume One, 25.

¹³⁶ It also carries Master Fard Muhammad, and as we will see in Chapter Six, Elijah Muhammad, according to a vision of Louis Farrakhan. See, for example, Louis

The Wheel, the Mother Ship, is one of the greatest wonders of man in making military weapons. The Black Scientists knew at the time that they build the Mother Ship, that the Mother Ship and its well-trained crew would have to fight with her and the other Nations of the earth. . . . Actually, the Wheel, the Mother Ship, serves as a carrier for 1,500 deadly prepared planes with which to visit mankind [*sic*] on Planet Earth.¹³⁷

The MP is evidence of the aesthetical, mathematical, and technical wizardry of the black nation. It indicates the astounding intellect of black people, that black bodies are not devoid of consciousness and intellect as some Western philosophies have argued. On the contrary: "The finest [black] brains were used to build it."¹³⁸ The Wheel is even a wonder to Muhammad, who is overwhelmed by its majesty:

The Wheel is so wonderful that even the prophet had to declare it in these words, 'O Wheel, O Wheel' meaning that he is admiring his vision that he was receiving from Allah (God). The Wheel is the most wonderful and the most miraculous mechanical building of plane [*sic*] that has ever been imagined by man. The planes on this Wheel will be sent down, earthward, and are capable of destroying the world almost at once.¹³⁹

Farrakhan. *The Announcement: A Final Warning to the U.S. Government* (Chicago: FCN Publishing Co., 1989).

¹³⁷ Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 13-4.

¹³⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 291.

¹³⁹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 291; Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 28.

The dimensions of the Wheel are one-half mile by one-half mile.¹⁴⁰ In fact, though human made, the MP is a small planet that can remain in outer space for a year without descending into the earth's atmosphere to take on more oxygen and hydrogen.¹⁴¹ Again, the MP indicates the technical skill that is necessary for the development of such a great military vehicle.

Michael Lieb, author of *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of the End Time*, has a similar take on the MP phenomenon as the one presented thus far. Lieb surveys fictional literature, religious ideas, and scientific technology that engages and uses Ezekiel's vision as a model or guide or those that view it as a literal ancient visitation by a divine being or space aliens. He argues that Ezekiel's vision provides an aesthetic archetype which expresses the human desire to technologize and mechanize the ineffable, the inexpressible, and the unknowable—to render it intelligible and mundane in order to master it.¹⁴² One such technological machine, he contends, is the unidentified flying object (UFO).¹⁴³

Using Heideggerian language, Leib supports my earlier contention that the MP, a type of UFO onto-technology, represents the mechanism through which the being of a

¹⁴⁰ Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 28.

¹⁴¹ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 291; Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 55.

¹⁴² Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 3.

¹⁴³ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 3, 42. See also, Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

thing is revealed, brought forth, disclosed, unconcealed¹⁴⁴—in this case, the true nature of the black race. This disclosure or bringing forth is an aesthetic endeavor in that the highest form of *technē*, skill and know-how, is *poiesis*,¹⁴⁵ artistic meaningful uncovering. Richard Rojcewicz, author of *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger*, explains:

The sense of producing or bringing-forth by Heidegger, namely, the bringing forth of something out of concealment, bringing it to show itself in unconcealment, is exactly the one we mean when we speak of producing witnesses in court. To produce witnesses does not mean to create them, to fabricate them for the occasion, to bring them into being out of nonbeing. It means, rather, merely to lead them forth, which is indeed the etymological sense of ‘pro-duce,’ namely: ‘draw forth,’ ‘lead forth.’ It means to bring the witnesses (who already exist) out of an invisibility into a visibility.¹⁴⁶

Accordingly, this technology of epistemology denotes Muhammad’s longing to transform the otherness of the divine and secret knowledge and the unknown into an essence that can be appropriated and “placed in service of those who are no longer human but tantamount to gods,”¹⁴⁷ often as compensation for their relative powerlessness I would

¹⁴⁴ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 14.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 47.

¹⁴⁷ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 17.

add. The MP can be read, then, as a divine vehicle, a chariot of work (*ma'aseh merkabah*),¹⁴⁸ which discloses the truth (*alētheia*),¹⁴⁹ previous gnosis, of black bodies in all their splendor—cosmic, transcendent, ultimate, divine, and destroying the evil reign of oppression, that establishes a new order which discloses once and for all the nature of those who were once the most despised people on the planet.

Muhammad intimates that the world has had glimpses of the MP. These “sightings” are epistemological misrecognitions of the MP as UFOs,¹⁵⁰ due to the temporal limitations of the knowledge and intellect of whites, who have had only 6,000 years of experience on this earth since their making. The black race’s knowledge, on the other hand, is cumulative and cosmic, reflecting trillions of years of data of sublime proportions¹⁵¹:

There the Messenger of Allah makes clear that the knowledge that he imparts is of the most profound sort. A form of black gnosis, it is a knowledge that is not

¹⁴⁸ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 164.

¹⁴⁹ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 34; Cf. Joseph J. Kickelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 163: “By truth we mean here the essence of what is true. In recollecting the Greek word *alētheia* we think truth as non-concealment of beings.”

¹⁵⁰ Lee, *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement*, 63. By mid-1960s Muhammad was reporting sightings of UFOs as a definite sign of impending judgment and the “Battle in the Sky.”

¹⁵¹ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 164.

shared by the white race, first because the white race is incapable of understanding it or appreciating it and second because the white race would put this knowledge to perverse use.¹⁵²

This gnosis of the “profound sort” signifies that black bodies are much more complex than other bodies on the planet, and they capable of unrivaled intellectual capacity of cosmic proportions that will be brought into fruition at the arrival of the MP. In addition, not only have the oppressors a temporally limited resource of information, their misrecognition is due to their own perverse intentions and behavior, according to Leib. Charles Long, author of *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, means something similar when he talks about America’s violent past with respect to Native Americans and the Africans—it’s *arché*. Failure to deal with the genesis of its own existence as such has lead to self-concealment, a difficulty in assigning proper language to reality, and to the misinterpretation of such.¹⁵³

Nevertheless, whites have some limited knowledge of the MP and the impending judgment of Master Fard Muhammad upon them. This is the real reason for the American space program (i.e., N.A.S.A.). American space technology is conspiratorial in nature; its real intent is to escape destruction or to attempt to launch a defensive counter-attack from the Moon, Mars, or Venus. Even this, he says, will not work:

¹⁵² Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 163.

¹⁵³ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 136-8.

You cannot live on the Moon, only just so long as your oxygen and hydrogen last you. The moon is about the closest platform that I know of, that you could probably use. Venus and Mars. . .you cannot use Venus and Mars. The people on Mars will not let you light (land) on Mars. If they do let you land on Mars; they will be silly to do so.¹⁵⁴

In a demonstration of black intellectual and psychical abilities, however, he proposes that African Americans, who are connected psychically to one another and to the MP, can detect the MP through telepathic clairvoyance:

You can do it [read the thoughts of others] yourself if you will take the time, clear your mind, and then go some place where no one will disturb you, and concentrate on that Wheel or that Brother After a while you what the Brother is saying to himself. Maybe you can hear the motors going in one of the wheels.¹⁵⁵

Even before the MP plane arrives, Muhammad points to the potential of black intellect by suggesting black bodies are imbued with extra-sensory perceptions and abilities that are not earthbound. Lieb likens this to a form of meditative transcendence similar to *merkabah* mysticism,¹⁵⁶ in which the adherent connects to a source or form of power not readily available materially.

Conclusion

¹⁵⁴ Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 29.

¹⁵⁵ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 176.

¹⁵⁶ Leib, *Children of Ezekiel*, 176.

This chapter has intimated that Elijah Muhammad's project was the meaningful making and unveiling of ideal black bodies. In his endeavor, he utilized a variety of ritual, theological, and philosophical sources to re-imagine and to re-present the race. While he was concerned with physical and religious-symbolic bodies, this chapter showed how the practices varied depending on which body was his concern. For bodies as material and biological, he was much more concerned with ritual practices that improved the physical appearance, health, and cleanliness.

On the other hand, when his regard was for black bodies as symbols of the NOI collective that resisted being totalized and defined by the social system at large, the sources were much more discursive—mythological, theological. Given the two, this chapter has argued that Muhammad privileged the religious over the social (physical), and therefore, ideal bodies were apotheosized *black bodies out-of-place* symbolically rather than socially, since Muhammad was rarely if ever interested in his members engaging oppressive governmental and social structures, but rather in teaching them who they were and imparting esoteric knowledge that revealed their ultimate place in the cosmos. Reflecting the mythological, cosmological, and theological discourses that located the origins of blackness extraterrestrially, and their ultimate meaning having been disclosed and unconcealed by the Mother Plane, black bodies semiotically indicated transcendence, pointed “out there” for their significance even though they were material and earthbound.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately, much of the literary corpus has failed to do justice to the complexity of the NOI because it has failed to see it fully as a religious organization.

Features of ideal black bodies constructed through, ritualization and discourse, constitute a distinct bodily economy that distinguished them from other

This is the case for Clifton Marsh's *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America*, which analyzes the NOI in the context of social theory and black nationalism, Martha Lee's *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement*, which views the NOI as only nominally religious, Essien-Udom's *Black Nationalism* for obvious reasons implied in the title and for dismissing the NOI as not "genuine Islam," which seems to have affected his engagement of them as a religious group, and more than these, C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America*, which denies that the NOI is a religion and that it only uses religious language strategically to veil ill feelings toward whites. Clifton Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD and London, 2000); e.g., Lee, *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement*, 91, where she argues that after Elijah Muhammad's death, "The Muslims were clearly a religious rather than a political group." Her misunderstanding of the NOI as religious during Muhammad's leadership may in part be related to that fact that she follows Marsh, Lincoln, and Essien-Udom as major sources, none of which recognize the NOI as fully religious and all of which lacked attention to any critical theory of religion that might have appropriately informed their perspective as social scientists; Essien-Udom's *Black Nationalism*, 198; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994), 2, 46, 215.

black bodies. To that end, Lee concludes, as I do here, that “All of these set Muslims apart from other Blacks” and gave them cohesiveness and identity,¹⁵⁸ different from other black bodies in the world. The NOI black body is a distinct black body that was differentiated as we saw in Chapter Two by critiquing certain unappealing black bodies (*in-place*), and through its own religious system which constituted an ideal black body economy as: Muslim, male, masculine, healthy, adult, “middle-class,” heterosexual, mystical-esoteric, light complexioned, and gifted/intelligent. What gets effectively eschewed and marginalized is a body constituted by any combination of features from the default black bodily economy: Christian, female, effeminate male, homosexual, dark complexioned, political/”integrationist,” working class/poor, disabled, etc.

These black bodies were perceived as dangerous to the dominant culture because they were symbolically *out-of-place*. They resisted being totalized by the social system and rendered inferior. These were healthy and vibrant bodies that were understood as superior to any other bodies in existence on earth, and intellectually more gifted than any in the universe. They were the most beautiful and the most righteous and religious bodies, and because of this attitude about who they were, the NOI was not afraid to transgress symbolic boundaries by critiquing white supremacy as a farce, an illusion. Therefore, even though Muhammad, as we will see in the next chapter, never advised his members to engage social structures of oppression or to harm white Americans in any way, this symbolic *out-of-placeness* was, nevertheless,

¹⁵⁸ Lee, *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement*, 130.

seen as a threat to the social order. Muhammad was a religious leader, whose primary goals were to construct ideal black bodies that would be prepared for the New World and the greatness that was to come at its arrival.

The ritual dietary laws contained therein encompass the full range of issues related to food, that is to say, what was permissible to eat, what was forbidden, food preparation, and the appropriate times to eat to fast. In addition, the codes include dietary recommendations for extending one's life, health maintenance, weight loss and gain, market procurement of food, and even economic well-being, given that proper attention to diet has the economic benefit of reducing medical issues and therefore health-related costs.

At the outset, one may note that many of the dietary interdictions proscribe from the diet many foods that have historic and cultural significance for African-Americans. Primary on this list is pork or what Muhammad derogatorily calls "swine." Muhammad vociferously and repeatedly rails against the ingestion of pork more than any other food, suggesting: "The taking of the prohibited flesh of the swine as food is beyond righteous imagination."¹⁵⁹ The swine for him is a filthy animal that was grafted, or made by an artificial process, for medical purposes rather than for food. White people, according to Muhammad, introduced black people to the hog as food in order to make them immoral and weak, since a grafted animal or human is less strong and moral than the original.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Muhammad, *How to Eat*. Book One, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Muhammad, *How to Eat*. Book One, 14, 72.

Additional proscriptions from the African-American diet included black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, collard greens, turnip greens, kale, corn bread, catfish, chicken,¹⁶¹ processed sugar, flour products, seafood, and so on. The extensive list of prohibited foods was greater than what is listed above. Notwithstanding, the forbidden foods all seemed to be related thematically to slavery, class consciousness, and the malformation of the body. This statement reveals the unspoken motivation for Muhammad's dietary interdictions, namely, to raise the status of black bodies from the grotesque, slave-oriented, and common, to the differentiated and special. Muhammad was acutely aware of the relationship between food and status and social class and therefore forbid the ingestion of any "filthy" or scavenger food that would work against the bodies he was trying to create through a negative food association. Therefore, following the NOI dietary rules would lead to the beautification of the black body.

¹⁶¹ Muhammad, *How to Eat*. Book One, 11. "Chickens are not fit to eat. You have to nurse them so carefully to keep them away from filth."

Chapter Four

Malcolm X and Black Bodies *Out-of-Place*: Visible Bodies, Language, and the Implied Critique of Elijah Muhammad

Chapter One explores the notion of embodiment and how the notion has been constructed and deployed with regard to African Americans. Furthermore, the chapter argues that the body is both a biochemical reality and a symbol of a given social collectivity and cosmology. Moreover, Chapter One introduced a theory of the black body, “black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*” that frames this project, then mapped the body through the history of the NOI in the critical historical moments of this study, that is, the during influences of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan.

Chapter Two explored Muhammad’s critique of black bodies *in-place*—deplorable and “ugly” black bodies that, for him, had been ideologically “whitenized” by Christianity. Such black bodies *in-place* were epitomized by African American Christian preachers, Muhammad contended. To that end, Muhammad’s critique was grounded in NOI mythology of Yakub, which taught that Christianity was the religion that a renegade black scientist named Yakub used to justify and to conceal his efforts to destroy the original black people. Christianity was, therefore, “*tricknology*,” an elaborate science of lies and deception that Yakub used which white people continued to use to make slaves out of black people.

Chapter Three argued that Muhammad used multiple ritual and discursive resources in the “making” of ideal black bodies and that these practices and teachings corresponded to and varied depending on whether his concern was for physical bodies, of

which the source was primarily ritualistic praxis, or symbolic and religious bodies, constituted primarily by and through discursive principles. Finally, the chapter maintained that Muhammad privileged the symbolic and religious over the physical and social, and while he was interested in vibrant physical bodies, his ultimate concern was for religious bodies that reflected NOI cosmology, mythology, and theology.

Chapter Four will argue that Malcolm X inverted or reversed the paradigm of Muhammad, who privileged the symbolic over the social, that he, therefore, made black bodies in the NOI publically visible, both by way of his proselytic work in which the NOI grew and became known to the American public and by way of his own linguistic resistance through his lectures and speeches. Related to this, the chapter will argue that Malcolm X longed to be engaged socially (i.e., bodily) in the struggle for justice, not just symbolically as a distant critic. Since Malcolm privileged the social over the symbolic, or at least he gave greater importance to the social than did Muhammad, functioned as, indeed, became a black body *out-of-place* socially, not just symbolically as it would appear on the surface. This section will argue that he did so by and large via the materiality of language. That is, language as an embodied reality allowed him to be “*there*,” even though his social activity was severely limited by Elijah Muhammad. His desire to join the struggle for freedom actively was an implied critique of Muhammad that he made explicit after his break with the NOI in 1964.

This chapter proceeds, noting that the image of Malcolm has been reified as a paragon of masculinity, which excludes his frailties and his personal relationships from the discourses. “Malcolm” has become an image, a shadow, behind which lies vague and often misappropriated correspondences that are only recognizable as legend.

Substantively, many studies have obscured the man, whose life may be much more revealing in terms of what it means for black bodies or any-bodies which are caught in systems of domination. Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman) notes:

Brother Malcolm has become a symbol, a dream, a hope, a nostalgia for the past, a mystique, a shadow sometimes without substance, ‘our shining black prince,’ to whom we do obeisance, about whom we write heroic poems. But I think Brother Malcolm the man is in danger of being lost in a vast tissue of distortions which now constitute Malcolm the myth.¹

While acknowledging the tenuous situation of Malcolm’s image, Cleage goes on to dispel the myths that Malcolm became an integrationist, that he accepted “Islam” uncritically after he made the hajj, and that after this pilgrimage, race was no longer important to him.²

To that end, Michael Eric Dyson’s *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*³ and Marable’s *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future*⁴ rail against the social, economic,

¹ Cleage, *Myths About Malcolm X*, 14.

² Cleage, *Myths About Malcolm X*, 15-6.

³ Dyson, Michael Eric. *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ Manning Marable. *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006).

and “intellectual,” forces that intentionally give inadequate attention to his life and work.

Dyson comments:

Such critical studies must achieve the ‘thickest description’ possible of Malcolm’s career while avoiding explanations that either obscure or reduce the complex nature of his achievements and failures. Judging by these standards, the literature on Malcolm X has often missed the mark... Much writing about Malcolm has either lost its way in the murky waters of psychology dissolved from history or simply substituted—defensive praise for critical appraisal. At times, insights on Malcolm have been tarnished by insular ideological arguments that neither illuminate nor surprise.⁵

Indeed, Dyson has in mind many critical appraisals of Malcolm but in particular the *Autobiography*,⁶ much of which reflects Haley’s own ideological commitments and literary intentions. Hence, many studies, he and Marable maintain, offer only limited views that are constrained by a desire to deify or to demonize him for one’s own political purposes.

A telling example of such conventional constructs and reifications is the poem by Amiri Baraka entitled “A Poem for Black Hearts” that appears in his *Eulogies*.⁷ It is poignant because of the way in which it idolizes Malcolm as a “black god” who was

⁵ Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 23.

⁶ Malcolm X [with Alex Haley]. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).

⁷ Amiri Baraka. *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996).

martyred because of his love for black people. Because of its length, it appears here in truncated form:

. . . For Malcolm's heart, raising us above our filthy cities, for his stride, and his beat, and his address to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's pleas for your dignity, black man, for your life, black man, for the filling of your minds with righteousness, For all of him dead and gone and vanished from us, and all of him, and all of yourself, look up, black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him, For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of the earth.⁸

This representation of Malcolm as a masculine messiah-"prince" who raised "us ["black men"] above our filthy cities," is not an uncommon construction of Malcolm. What is disturbing in Baraka's poem is not only the obvious sexism but also the blatant homophobia that gets conflated with Malcolm's image, in an attempt, seemingly, to express the anxiety and feeling of being dominated by white supremacy that often gets expressed in terms of emasculation and homophobia. Therefore, the vengeful anger in this poem is curious but comprehensible, given that it may assist in veiling the homoerotic overtones in the longing for and nostalgic devotion to Malcolm.⁹ Many of

⁸ Baraka, *Eulogies*, 1.

⁹ See, Stephen C. Finley. "Homoeroticism and the African American Heterosexual Male Quest for Meaning in the Black church." *Black Theology: An International Journal* 5.3

these discursively and culturally violent themes surface, particularly among cultural nationalists and African American radicals, apparently without any trepidation that they may not be wholly consistent with Malcolm's life and thought.

Malcolm X and the Theology and Thought of Elijah Muhammad:

Consonance and Consent

Again, the topics that often get ignored are the ones that may directly affect the image of Malcolm as a deeply religious and theological person during his tenure in the NOI and the fixed image of Malcolm as a symbol of manhood.¹⁰ While the goal is to demonstrate that Malcolm diverged from Muhammad's ideology toward the end of his

(2007): 319; Sigmund Freud. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 17.

¹⁰ Moreover, the concern here is that scholarship generally fails to give adequate attention to the religious life and thought of Malcolm X while he was a member of the NOI, his personal life, and to the subterranean but nevertheless contentious relationship between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad in the later years of his membership. Such scholarship and popular culture have made him an idol that lacks complexity, depth, and human frailty. Two notable exceptions can be found in the works of Louis DeCaro. See, Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998); Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996).

time in the Nation, initially he was deeply committed to the mythology, theology, and ideals of the Nation¹¹—in short, he shared Muhammad's ideals and his concerns for black bodies and only subsequently did he develop his own social vision for black bodies that became in conflict with those of his mentor. Three areas, in particular, are important, as we will demonstrate, for a discussion of the black body.¹²

The first area of consonance between Muhammad and Malcolm was the Yacub-Mother Plane discourse, and one can safely say that earlier in Malcolm's NOI career, he agreed with Muhammad's theology in general.¹³ Consistent with what we have argued above, Wayne Taylor, in an interesting article on Malcolm and the apocalypse, decries the many works on Malcolm's life and thought that appropriate his philosophy via Black Nationalist, social, and political thought and ignore his theological commitments. While Taylor problematically attempts to interpret the theology of Malcolm as consistent with

¹¹ Wayne Taylor. "Premillennium Tension: Malcolm X and the Eschatology of the Nation of Islam." *Souls* 7.1 (2005): 52-65.

¹² See, for example, Malcolm X, *Autobiography*. Rather than offering a protracted history of Malcolm X in the NOI, I will simply proffer that the history is well documented and available to students of historiography who are interested in pursuing its details. Instead, a brief examination of some of the ways in which Malcolm's religious, social, and theological thought were consonant with Elijah Muhammad's and the ways in which Malcolm critiqued Muhammad are foremost here.

¹³ Wayne Taylor. "Premillennium Tension: Malcolm X and the Eschatology of the Nation of Islam." *Souls* 7.1 (2005): 52.

and rooted in the African American Christian tradition of Black Liberation Theology, he does give attention to the importance of Muhammad's theology for Malcolm, especially until 1959 roughly, when Malcolm began to move away from the mythology of Yakub in his attempt to market *en masse* the NOI to middle class African Americans.¹⁴

Taylor argues that the Yakub story appealed to Malcolm in part because of his materialist and "scientific" perspective of the world. To that end, the earthbound theology of the narrative made perfect sense to him and helped to give coherence to his world. Like Muhammad's materialist approach to the world, Malcolm agreed that God could not be a spirit or "spook," that heaven did not exist, and that hell was on earth, not some celestial reality.¹⁵ Malcolm demonstrates the astrophysical and geographical notions that are embedded in the Yakub narrative when he talks about the origins of the races, not as epochal but as historical and scientific. In a December 1962 lecture on the "Black Man's History," he contends:

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that sixty-six trillion years ago—trillion, how much is trillion? Not hundreds, nor thousands, nor millions, nor billions, but sixty-six trillion years ago—the black man was here. We have the sun which is the center of the universe; 36,000,000 million miles from the sun is the planet Mercury, and 67,200,000 miles from the sun is the planet called Venus, and 93,000,000 miles from the sun is the planet that you and I live on

¹⁴ Taylor, "Premillennium Tension," 53, 64.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Premillennium Tension," 59. See also, Muhammad, *Message* and my Chapter Two for detailed discussions.

called Earth, 141,500,000 miles out here is a planet called Mars, and 483,000,000 miles from the sun is a planet called Jupiter. . .So right here this planet that you and I live on called Earth, that rotates around the sun, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that sixty-six trillion years ago our people were living on this planet: the black man was living on this planet.¹⁶

It is interesting that as late as December 1962 and early 1963 Malcolm continued to teach the Yakub narrative in such great detail.¹⁷ Note that Malcolm was speaking to a group of his own NOI members, but this was said to be an important lecture for him.¹⁸ In it, he connects it to the numerical distances of the planets in the solar system in order to communicate the scientific nature of Yakub. It was not mythology for him. Rather, it was historical and scientific. The implications of this notion are that black bodies are concrete and material, and that their activity may perhaps be better focused on the here and now, since heaven does not exist as a transcendent reality, especially poignant given the formerly Christian audience to which he was speaking.¹⁹

¹⁶ Benjamin Karim, ed. *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1971), 44.

¹⁷ Karim, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 23-66.

¹⁸ Karim, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 13-5. According to the editor of this volume, Benjamin Karim, who prepared the audience and introduced Malcolm on that day.

¹⁹ See Chapters Two and Three. I want to signal here the possibility that the same material perspective that he shared with Muhammad may have been the ideological

Malcolm also would have embraced Muhammad's and Fard's idea that white people were devils,²⁰ as the Yakub story detailed, and his experience seemed to confirm this as he pondered his life.²¹ For example, only one of his father's many brothers died of natural causes. Nearly all of the others died as a result of some racial violence at the hands of whites, at least one the victim of police brutality and another of lynching. Malcolm reflected:

Among the many reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this [Black Nationalist, Garveyite]²² philosophy among his

orientation that, in fact, was the ground of his later disagreement with him. It stands to reason that if the material IS all that exists that one has to engage in concrete activities in order to bring about justice, freedom, and equality (all important principles of the NOI as indicated by the letters J, F, E on their flag). It may have been that this was the basis on which Malcolm departed with the theology and philosophy of Muhammad's not to engage social structures of oppression but instead to wait on the arrival of the Mother Plane, which would usher in the millennium.

²⁰ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 161-2.

²¹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 162-3.

²² Jan Carew, *Ghosts in Our Blood: With Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), x. According to Carew, Malcolm's elder brother, Wilfred, denied that their father was ever a Baptist preacher as many biographers and Malcolm have claimed, but rather, he was "a Garveyite activist whom sympathetic Black ministers allowed to address their congregations from time to time."

people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my father could not know is that of the remaining three, including himself, only one my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar, and my father was finally himself to die by the white man's hands.²³

Malcolm goes on to explain how his father was killed by a group of violent white racists called the Black Legion who laid his father on a railway track in front of a streetcar. According to Malcolm, his father was almost cut in half, and his skull was crushed.²⁴ Malcolm enumerates these events in the *Autobiography* in order to explain why for him America was a nightmare. Because of his experiences, Malcolm was unable to see any good in the racist American system and why the story of Yakub, as the creator of the devil, resonated.

On the other hand, Malcolm seemed to reflect either disagreement with Muhammad or a shift in Muhammad's thought with respect to Freemasonry and the devil white people. For Malcolm (and perhaps for Muhammad), the Masons and the Jehovah's Witnesses represented ideological and theological opponents of the NOI,²⁵ which is, of course, peculiar since the NOI has its genealogical roots in Freemasonry and borrowed heavily both from it and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's Charles "Taze"

²³ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 2.

²⁴ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 3, 19.

²⁵ Taylor, "Premillennium Tension," 53.

Russell and Joseph Franklin “Judge” Rutherford.²⁶ Yet, in *Birth of a Savior* Muhammad was reported to have stated the following in a February 26, 1958 Saviour’s Day address, “We are the true witnesses of God. You have a gang of devils around here calling themselves Jehovah’s Witnesses. Talking about they are the witness of Jehovah, when did a devil become a witness of Jehovah?”²⁷ A few pages later, in the same publication, Muhammad offers a remonstrance against the Freemasons and how they fail to treat “Negroes” as equals, no matter how high they rise through the degrees of the secret order.²⁸ Malcolm’s introduction into the dogma of the NOI will include the theme of race and masonry.

Indeed, Malcolm’s early catechism into NOI doctrine by his brother Reginald included an extremely rationalistic notion of God, which equated God with epistemology. “Who would be a man who knows everything,” his brother asked him. Malcolm replied

²⁶ See Chapter Three of this work for a discussion of the relationship between Freemasonry and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Also, it is clear that some may use the vociferous renunciation or denial of a movement or issue in order to distance oneself from it or to conceal a significant relationship with it. For an example of such a dynamic, see Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966), 528.

²⁷ Elijah Muhammad. *Birth of a Savior* (Chicago: Coalition for the Remembrance of Elijah, 1993), 38.

²⁸ Muhammad. *Birth of a Savior*, 45.

“God.”²⁹ That is, God *WAS* knowledge but not only information but literally geometrical, mathematical, philosophical, and theological gnosis embodied. But, while God was three hundred-sixty degrees of knowledge, the Devil was knowledge of only thirty-three degrees, which signifies the highest degree in American Masonry. “The white man is the devil,” Reginald retorted, “especially Masons.”³⁰ Malcolm suggested that this idea was consistent with his life as he reflected on it and was a revelation of truth.³¹ This idea further points to his perspective as highly empirical and rational, which on the surface, seems to concur with the perspective of Muhammad that black bodies are strictly material.

It is not wholly clear whether or not the views of Freemasonry in the *Autobiography* (and the Jehovah’s Witnesses) reflect an evolution in Muhammad’s thought, Reginald’s own views, or Malcolm’s perspective (in retrospect).³² If the latter is the case, however, it is somewhat of a divergence and a contradiction in that for Muhammad masonry was not the master signifier of the Devil. In fact, embedded in the symbols and secret knowledge of masonry was the truth of the black race, that they were the original people of the universe and that Allah was a black god. Furthermore, such a perspective, if Malcolm’s, might conflict with Muhammad’s, given that such a

²⁹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 161-3.

³⁰ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 161-2.

³¹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 162-3.

³² Taylor, “Premillennium Tension,” 53. Taylor seems to suggest that it was Malcolm’s perspective that he adopted from Muhammad.

perspective, (i.e., whites as masonic) would seem to render white bodies esoteric, mystical, and gnostic, making them not characteristically and categorically different from black bodies, since the knowledge within Freemasonry reflected the deepest and ultimate esoteric knowledge and the universe.

Regardless of whether or not masonry signified black bodies or white ones, Malcolm viewed whites as the enemy—a position that did not change throughout his life. What may have shifted later in his career as he became much more public in his prophetic and intellectual activity is his view of whites as ontologically evil. That is, Malcolm would suggest in 1965 (after leaving the NOI) that the American system nourished whites psychologically to act in evil and violent ways, that it was the culture and social system of America that was to blame for the behavior of whites, not that they were qualitatively different in nature from African Americans or people of color generally.³³ Of course, the flaw in this logic is that people constitute the “system,” and social institutions function in service of those who are in power. So, while Malcolm may have effectively rejected the specific mythological, ahistorical, and non-scientific content of the Yakub narrative, he, nevertheless, retained the ultimate meaning of the epic—the identification and naming of the enemy of the black race.

In keeping with this interpretation, Cleage maintained that Malcolm took Muhammad’s mythology and teachings and universalized them so that people, no matter what their religion, could understand and accept them. He argues for the basic agreement in teaching between him, Muhammad, and Malcolm, especially as it pertains to whites as

³³ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 374.

enemies.³⁴ Cleage suggested that naming whites as the enemies of African Americans was the basic truth that was the foundation for everything that Malcolm said and did. Cleage states it this way: “The white man [sic] is your enemy. That is a basic principle, we can’t forget it.”³⁵

The thrust of this contention conceivably was encapsulated in Malcolm’s famous address, “Message to the Grass Roots,” at the Detroit Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, held at the King Solomon Baptist Church in 1963.³⁶ Malcolm asserted:

America’s problem is us. We’re her problem. . . . When we come together, we don’t come together as Baptists and Methodists. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Methodist. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Methodist or Baptist, you don’t catch hell because you’re a Democrat or Republican, you don’t catch hell because you’re a Mason or an Elk, and you sure don’t catch hell because

³⁴ Cleage, “Myths About Malcolm X,” 19.

³⁵ Cleage, “Myths About Malcolm X,” 21.

³⁶ Malcolm X. “Message to the Grass Roots” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 3. Malcolm also stated this same basic position in a 1964 speech called “The Ballot or the Bullet” in the same publication as above (23-44, esp. 24-5). Note that this speech was delivered after Malcolm’s “silencing” by Muhammad due to comments that he made about John F. Kennedy’s assassination (November 22, 1963).

you're an American. You catch hell because you're a black man [*sic*]. You catch hell, all of us catch hell for the same reason.³⁷

Here, in an illustration that Malcolm seemed to be moving away from the privatized practices and ideology of Muhammad and recognizing the importance of coalition building prior to leaving the NOI,³⁸ he addresses his words to America's people of color and suggests that the colonized world (i.e., "black, brown, red, yellow"³⁹), especially black people, need to come together in order to confront white supremacy. His use of the words, "black, brown, red, yellow," to refer to colonized people indicates a basic conservation of Muhammad's metaphysics of world order as a binary black/non-black (i.e., white).⁴⁰ Malcolm's contention is that whites have positioned themselves violently

³⁷ Malcolm X. "Message to the Grass Roots," 4.

³⁸ See, Marable, *Living Black History*, 157. Marable asks regarding Malcolm and coalition building with African American civic and political groups, "Was this the prime reason that both the Nation of Islam and the FBI may have wanted to silence Malcolm X?"

³⁹ Malcolm X. "Message to the Grass Roots," 4. Even the reference here to "black, brown, red, and yellow," may be rooted in Muhammad's metaphysics as expressed in the Yakub saga, in that Muhammad understood the Black Nation to be characterized by people who in his words were "black, brown, red, [and] yellow." Stated another way, he understood the world as black and non-black (white). Malcolm seems to retain this metaphysic at least as a strategic approach to combating white supremacy.

⁴⁰ Cf. 38n.

over against black people and people of color, and that the recognition of whites as a common enemy, who reduces all black people to an externalized and racialized epidermis,⁴¹ is a necessary pre-condition for a liberating consciousness and strategy.

Consistent with this reading, Cleage, who shared the platform with Malcolm and was one of the organizers of the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference,⁴² declares that Malcolm articulated this basic position, alluding to “Message to the Grass Roots,” but not identifying it by name:

As Black people, we have an enemy who is involved in the systematic program of oppression, brutality, and exploitation. If we are to survive we must know who the enemy is and understand how he functions. Brother Malcolm defined our problem very simply when he stated that we are not discriminated against because we are Baptist, Methodist, or Muslim, but because we are Black. We can be discriminated against because our physical characteristics make us recognizable and enable the white group which holds power to keep us separate, powerless, and stigmatized as ‘inferior.’ We are oppressed as members of a group, not as individuals. We

⁴¹ See, Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111-2. Fanon talked about having his “corporal schema” reduced to a “racial epidermal schema,” which was fixed as object in the white gaze. See also, Chapter One of this project.

⁴² See, Malcolm X. “Message to the Grass Roots,” 3.

suffer as individuals and we are humiliated as individuals, but only because we belong to the Black group.⁴³

Cleage credits Malcolm with the recognition and declaration of white people as the enemy as an important prerequisite for black counter-action, and he tacitly approves of his insistence on coalition building by reminding his audience of the veracity of Malcolm's claim that African Americans are discriminated against, not because of social class, education, or religion, but due to their phenotype and in particular their skin color. But again, this basic position is rooted in Muhammad's and Fard's Yakub myth. The only significant difference is that after leaving the Nation, Malcolm revised Muhammad's position, says Cleage, to one that viewed white people as "beasts" because of how they treated black people. Likewise, a beast is lower than a human, and in some ways, this notion reproduces Muhammad's human [black]/non-human [white] dichotomy, even though the distinction is behavioral (i.e., existential) and not ontological.⁴⁴

The most significant way, for this project, that Malcolm agreed with Muhammad and was influenced by him, even after leaving the NOI, however, was in his recognition of the centrality of the body—understood both as biological and as a symbol of a given

⁴³ Albert B. Cleage, Jr. *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church), 79.

⁴⁴ See, Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Maryland Heights, MO: Secretarius MEMPS, 1997), 103. Muhammad describes the story of Yakub and how whites nearly degenerated into "wild beasts."

social collectivity⁴⁵—in the struggle for African American liberation and selfhood. Race and we will see later—gender, for Malcolm, was attached to the body in real and concrete ways. Indeed, race was biological and social. That race was viewed as biologically ontological can be seen in numerous instances in which Malcolm referred to the body by way of appeal to the senses. For example, Malcolm reflected on how, as children, he and his siblings noticed that white bodies smelled differently.⁴⁶

Similarly, he recalled that while as a youth in a Mason, Michigan reform school, he observed that whites smelled differently, and they had a deviant sense of taste: “I noticed again how white people smelled differently from us, and how their food tasted differently, not seasoned like Negro cooking.”⁴⁷ Malcolm, again, may have been unconsciously following Muhammad in his ruminations on white smell and taste. Muhammad, for whom race was biological and ontological, and the differences between black bodies and white ones was qualitative and metaphysical, connected the sense of taste to the deterioration of the white race. Speaking of how, having been newly-made by Yakub, whites degenerated culturally after deceiving the original [black] people for six months, Muhammad details:

⁴⁵ See, Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003).

⁴⁶ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 17.

⁴⁷ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 27.

They were punished by being deprived of divine guidance for 2000 years which brought them almost into the family of wild beasts—going upon all fours; eating raw and unseasoned, uncooked food; living in caves and tree tops, climbing and jumping from one tree to the other.⁴⁸

As seen in Malcolm's earlier statement, his reference to unseasoned food may signify the debasement of whites even though he is popularly depicted as having moved away from notions of "race," after his religious experience of the hajj. Above, Muhammad explains how the story of Yakub depicts whites as regressed, almost to a state of animality in which their behavior was erratic, and their sense of taste was dulled.

The most poignant illustrations of Malcolm's views of race as a biochemical reality are his views of consanguinity. One such perspective is inherent in his essentialist notions of Black Nationalism and pan-Africanism.⁴⁹ Malcolm regarded all "black" people

⁴⁸ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 103.

⁴⁹ See, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *Exodus!: Race, Religion, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. 9, 163. Glaude argues that early nineteenth-century black nationalism was not based on essentialist notions of race, but rather was an African American religious (read: "Christian") response to slavery and white supremacy that was based on the Exodus motif in the Bible. Instead of an idea of "nation" based on race (i.e., consanguinity) and geography, Glaude argues that African Americans' nation language and identity was based on shared cultural meanings, experience, and a common desire for resistance to oppression. His thesis regarding nineteenth-century black nationalism would clearly not

or people of African descent as related to him. In his words, "I considered all Negroes to be my blood brothers."⁵⁰ His position was influenced by Marcus M. Garvey, whose writings Malcolm suggested that the nascent Organization for Afro-American Unity (June 28, 1964) should follow.⁵¹ Most immediately, his position was based on the religion of his former mentor, Elijah Muhammad, whom Malcolm credits with a viable long-term project to return African Americans to the continent of Africa. He claims that "Elijah Muhammad's solution is the best one. . . our people going back home, to our African homeland."⁵²

hold for the twentieth-century black nationalism of Malcolm X and the NOI, whose perspective was based on essentialist notions of race in addition to culture and experience.

⁵⁰ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 356-7.

⁵¹ Malcolm X. *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 59. Compare the entire address of the "Founding Rally of the OAAU," in which he announces his organization as a Black Nationalist group that will be independent of white financial support and control (33-67). "Afro-American" would include everyone in the Western hemisphere of African descent in North and South America, the Caribbean, etc (38).

⁵² Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," 20. Note that in Chapter Two I argued *contra* Edward Curtis that Muhammad advocated African emigration, a contention that Curtis denies in error. I offer more evidence here, given that Malcolm represents African emigration as Muhammad's long-term project. See, Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim*

What this idea of African emigration indicates is Malcolm's view that black people are related racially to one another. More specifically, as late as November 1963, he seems to conserve the notion that black, brown, yellow, and red peoples—apparently African, Latino, Asian, and Native American are all “black” biologically. He contends:

America's problem is us. We're her problem. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn't want us here. And every time you look at yourself, be you black, brown, red or yellow, a so-called Negro, you represent a person who poses such a serious problem to America because you're not wanted. . . What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences. When we come together, we don't come together as Baptists or Methodists. . . You don't catch hell because you're a Methodist or Baptist, you don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican. . .and you sure don't catch hell because you're an American; because if you were an American, you wouldn't catch hell. You catch hell because you're a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell for the same reason. So we're all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves.⁵³

The context seems clear. Malcolm is speaking at a black Baptist church (King Solomon's Baptist Church) in Detroit, Michigan to an audience that is “almost all black and with

Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 12; Compare Chapter Two, 150n and 151n.

⁵³ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 4.

non-Muslims in the great majority.”⁵⁴ This is one of the last speeches Malcolm would deliver before being suspended from the NOI by Muhammad, so it is not completely astonishing that he holds this position, but what is beginning to appear in his active public speaking is a subtle signal that he is moving away from Muhammad’s enclavist institutional orientation. In other words, through his lectures and appearances, even though espousing ideals that are closely tied to Muhammad, he implies that NOI black bodies are more active and less sectarian, given that many of his most significant speeches prior to leaving the NOI express much more appreciation for African American Christians.⁵⁵

The most obvious connection to the religious teachings of Muhammad is the idea that the sacred community of the NOI is the Black Nation, and that the idea that black people constitute a nation is deeply engrained—engendered from his relationship with Muhammad. In fact, Muhammad argued that the term “race” should not be applied to African Americans but to white people, given that they were made (See Chapter Two). Black people were not a race or designation of humanity. Rather, they were the original people, constituting a nation, not a race: “The race is a made race. This is why you should

⁵⁴ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 3. These are Breitmans’s, the editor’s, words.

⁵⁵ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 4-44. His last speech in while a member of the Nation, “Message to the Grassroots,” and his subsequent speeches after he was suspended a month later, (for example, “The Ballot or the Bullet”) indicate much more respect for black Christians, many of whom he mentions in his lectures as well as the fact that the venue for these lectures are often black churches.

not accept calling [*sic*] a 'race.' YOU ARE A NATION! Not to think over a Negro or a Colored people."⁵⁶ Important here is the idea that nationalism presupposes an essentialized notion of race, but that the nomenclature, "nation," profoundly influence Malcolm, even after his departure from the NOI. He proclaims:

Our gospel is black nationalism. We're not trying to threaten the existence of any organization, but we're spreading the gospel of black nationalism. Anywhere there's a church that is also preaching and practicing the gospel of black nationalism, join that church. If NAACP is preaching and practicing the gospel of black nationalism, join the NAACP. If CORE is spreading and practicing the gospel of black nationalism, join CORE. Join any organization that has a gospel that's for the uplift of the black man.⁵⁷

While it is clear that Malcolm's views of the solution to the race problem was increasingly less parochial, he still understood bodies as biological and race as a determinative factor that defined black bodies and tied them together. It could be argued that at this point in his life, "race" was his religion in the sense that after leaving the NOI and prior to his excursion to Africa and the Middle East, his convoluted notion of religion was located in black bodies, which for him may have been the only things that were concrete, stable, and quantifiable. Hence, his material and empirical outlook on life,

⁵⁶ Elijah Muhammad. *The True History of Master Fard Muhammad* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS, 2002), 157.

⁵⁷ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 41.

gained from Muhammad, remained his measuring rod for knowledge, truth, and authority.

Likewise, Malcolm inherited this notion of nationhood through blood from Muhammad and maintained it as an important part of his program throughout his life, even when after his international travels, he dealt openly and honestly with the fact that the idea needed reappraisal and perhaps broadening to include “Africans” on the continent, who may not be “black” in ways that he understood in America.⁵⁸ Consistent with the aforementioned, Dean E. Robinson, who wrote *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*,⁵⁹ argues that Muhammad established a template for 1960s black nationalism and that Malcolm broadened its applicability and secularized it in the OAAU platform.⁶⁰

A second example of consanguinity, indicating a physicalist ontology of race and the body as biological, is his struggle with his own mixed ancestry. He reports that his grandmother was raped by a slave owner thus producing his mother, and polluting his blood—an invasion into his body that he detests: “If I could drain away *his* blood that pollutes *my* body, and pollutes my complexion, I’d do it! Because I hate every drop of

⁵⁸ Malcolm X. *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 159-61.

⁵⁹ Dean E. Robinson. *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 34-50.

⁶⁰ See, Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 33-67; *Malcolm X. February 1965: Final Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 269-81.

that rapist's blood that's in me!"⁶¹ Malcolm talks openly and ambivalently about how he believes his light complexion gave him a sort of "privilege" in his life, and this project will also argue that such a complexion, as part of Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy (see Chapter Three), was one of the many factors that led to his rise and subsequent fall in the NOI, as Malcolm approximated these religious ideals in and on his own body.

"Blood" also determined certain behavioral characteristics for Malcolm, as with Muhammad. For instance, Malcolm differentially embraced racial stereotypes of black bodies, depending on whether or not he considered them harmful to black selfhood. In another indication that he regarding race as something biological, for instance, he intimated that "Whites are correct in thinking that black people are natural dancers."⁶² Conversely, having white ancestry and light complexion seemed to carry adverse meaning that had destructive consequences for African Americans. Along this same line, Muhammad reported that his paternal great-grandmother was half white,⁶³ and she acted like it, according to Muhammad.⁶⁴ Implied in this statement is a pejorative about her behavior that equates the presence of "white blood" with negative activity.

⁶¹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 206.

⁶² Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 60.

⁶³ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 165; Elijah Muhammad. *History of the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1993), 26.

⁶⁴ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 165; Claude Andrew Clegg, III. *An Original Man: The Life and times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 5.

Malcolm was affected by this stereotype, even within his own family. His wife, Betty Shabazz, tells a story about him as a father,⁶⁵ who was concerned about his oldest daughter, who coincidentally was his lightest-complexioned daughter. She reports, "At first it bothered him that Attallah was so light (Malcolm didn't want any light children) and we both wondered what in the world we'd done wrong for this little girl to come out looking like that."⁶⁶ Not only did it disturb Malcolm that his daughter was born light, as if she bore the emblem of a violent and oppressive [white] people and the evidence of rape, she may have even represented what he hated in himself, that is, the blood of a white man that ran in his veins. In fact, Attallah's light bodily complexion, Betty indicates, did conjure Malcolm's own reflexive anxieties, suggesting that Betty should be strict in raising her because he saw the "wildness" in her that was also in him.⁶⁷

Likewise, Malcolm's focus was on a critique of black bodies that reflected the social system, the racist collective culture of America. In other words, the black body that he engaged was similar to the black bodies *in-place* (Chapter Two) that Muhammad saw as ideologically "whitenized." It is interesting to note that as late as 1965 (February 10), the last year of his life, he still believed, like Muhammad, that Christianity could function ideologically to render black bodies symbolically *in-place*, stating that the:

⁶⁵ Betty Shabazz. "Malcolm X as a Husband and Father," in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 132-43.

⁶⁶ Shabazz, "Malcolm X as a Husband and Father," 136.

⁶⁷ Shabazz, "Malcolm X as a Husband and Father," 136.

Christian religion has been used to brainwash the Black man. It has taught him to look for his heaven in the hereafter while the white man enjoys his heaven on earth. I chose to be a Black Muslim and a realist. The American whites talk but do not practice brotherhood; therefore it is my duty to fight this evil. You see, you can't write up on some freedom, you must fight up on some freedom.⁶⁸

The point is significant, in part, because the “*Autobiography*” may leave one with the impression that the ideological break with Muhammad was much more significant than it appears to be. The implications in this text for whitenized black bodies *in-place*, however, is that it is not a realistic perspective that is able, due to its theology, to focus sufficient attention on the here and now. This critique also implicates Muhammad, who talks about Christians, but fails to “fight.” Yet, this section will focus on the tension between his developing philosophy and practices and Muhammad’s theology and praxis and argue that Malcolm’s social critique of black bodies was important because he privileged the social over the symbolic. That is to say, while Muhammad certainly had a social critique of black bodies that he found deplorable, this analysis was not the primary focus of his work. Instead, it served in the construction of ideal black bodies for Muhammad in the sense that it helped to differentiate NOI black bodies from other black bodies. Muhammad was not concerned with physical bodies crossing established social boundaries to challenge such conventional norms—his focus was on creating religious bodies that would be prepared to enter the “afterlife” at the coming of the Mother Plane.

⁶⁸ Malcolm X, *February 1965: Final Speeches*, 43.

Malcolm, conversely, was not satisfied with being a black body *out-of-place* symbolically and with being the member of an enclavist religious group that did not engage in overt civil rights and human rights agitation. Malcolm's project was a cultural critical and activist program whose resulting meaning, like Muhammad's ideal, signified black bodies *out-of-place* socially and symbolically but one, quite the opposite, in which the body was the referent overwhelmingly of the ultimate meaning of the resistant and recalcitrant social activity. Malcolm's social critique created a space and justification for his social endeavor, which imply a departure from the ideology of Elijah Muhammad. He made this very clear when asked about the distinction between his social thought and Muhammad's that may have led to his departure from the NOI:

I didn't break [with the NOI], there was a split. The split came about primarily because they put me out, and they put me out because of my uncompromising approach to problems. I thought should be solved and the movement could solve. I felt the movement was dragging its feet in many areas. It didn't involve itself in the civil or civic or political struggles our people were confronted by. All it did was stress the importance of moral reformation—don't drink, don't smoke, don't permit fornication and adultery. . . So the only way it could function and be meaningful in the community was to take part in political and economic facets of the Negro struggle. And the organization wouldn't do that because the stand it would have to take would have been too militant, uncompromising, and activist, and the hierarchy had gotten too conservative.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 158.

Malcolm is direct in his remonstrance that he did not leave the Nation, he was expelled. Accordingly, he was “put out” because of his perspective that the NOI should be involved in direct, bodily, confrontational activities that pertained to the liberation of black people from oppression.⁷⁰ He is critical of their hypocrisy for preaching moral purity but failing to practice it themselves. Given their vacuous moral pronouncements, the only way the group could have remained meaningful to the black struggle was to engage in political and economic activities that would benefit all black people, not simply the Nation. Malcolm also admits here that Muhammad was a “religious” leader, and as such, emphasized moral behavior but remained on the sidelines socially.

In so doing, Malcolm poignantly illustrates the contention of this chapter that Malcolm privileged the social over the symbolic and in so doing, critiqued Muhammad for overemphasizing the symbolic (see Chapter Two and Three). Physical black bodies as active, socially engaged, recalcitrant, and agential entities were the carriers of meaning that signified their full humanity not solely out of discursive pronouncements for Malcolm. Rather, they gained such meaning as they participated in their own liberation struggle. The process of freedom-producing activity whether it was voting and political engagement⁷¹ or self-defense⁷² of black communities is when black bodies came into

⁷⁰ *Malcolm X, February 1965: Final Speeches*, 43.

⁷¹ *Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary*, 69-74; 163-6; *Malcolm X, February 1965: Final Speeches*, 75-107; Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 23-44.

realization as religious and as human, not strictly through moral discourse or enclavist sensibilities. Again, this did not negate his knowledge that black bodies were important carriers of meaning, that is, that they were symbols, it only exemplified that black bodies as socially *out-of-place* was crucially important for him.

Like Muhammad, he remained critical of black bodies *in-place*. Two metaphors, both of which had the body as their references, characterized Malcolm's critique of black bodies *in-place* that mirrored the racist social system. The first of these metaphors was what he called "black bodies with white heads."⁷² This was a pejorative that he used particularly with "Negro leaders," who for him were "black" physically, but ideologically acted in accordance and complicity with white supremacy. In some ways, it was Malcolm's way of saying that these black bodies reflected the mentality of the white-dominated system, with little or no self-conscious agency of their own. Malcolm comments:

Today's Uncle Tome doesn't wear a handkerchief on his head. This modern, twentieth-century Uncle Thomas now often wears a top hat. He's usually well-dressed and well-educated. He's often the personification of culture and refinement. The twentieth-century Uncle Thomas sometimes speaks with a Yale or Harvard accent. Sometimes he is known as Professor, Doctor, Judge, and

⁷² Karim, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 128, *Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary*, 75-107; *Malcolm X, February 1965*, 75-107; Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 7-10; 23-4.

⁷³ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 248.

Reverend, even Right Reverend Doctor. . . Never before in America had these hand-picked so-called 'leaders' been publicly blasted in this way. They reacted to the truth about themselves even more hotly than the devilish white man. . . 'Black bodies with white heads!' I called them what they were. Every one of those 'Negro progress' organizations had the same composition. Black 'leaders' were out in the public eye—to be seen by the Negroes for whom they were supposed to be fighting the white man. But obscurely, behind the scenes, was a white boss—a president, or board chairman, or some other title, pulling the real strings.⁷⁴

Malcolm was extremely critical of those, including African American Christians, whom he saw as acting in the interest of the continued domination by whites. These people may have been black, but they had been co-opted by the system in ways that made them ineffective as "leaders." In fact, they were not leaders at all, according to him; they were "puppets."⁷⁵ It is also interesting to note that while Muhammad's primary criticism was on Negro Christians, Malcolm included African Americans who were part of the academy. Malcolm clearly was not being anti-intellectual in his remarks. Conversely, he seemed to suggest that, qualitatively, the knowledge of the "black" "Ph.D. 'house' and

⁷⁴ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 248.

⁷⁵ David Howard-Pitney. *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 127; Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 248.

'yard' Negroes"⁷⁶ was invalid because they were hand-picked by whites to oppose the NOI and to keep black people *in-place*.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was probably incriminated in his appraisal, as the epitome of "black bodies with white heads," given his popularity, his relationship to whites and goal of integrating with them, his education, and his public criticism of the NOI that, at times, were inaccurate and meant to placate whites. King said of the NOI, for example:

The Black Muslims are a quasi-religious, sociopolitical movement that has appealed to some Negroes who formally were Christians. What this appeal actually represents was an indictment of Christian failures to live up to Christianity's precepts.⁷⁷

King closely follows C. Eric Lincoln in this blatantly biased assessment of the NOI. In fairness to King, who was speaking in 1965, Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America*, was the first and more popular of the two book-length academic works on the NOI at this time,⁷⁸ and a paucity of literature existed that could be considered reliable with respect to an interpretation of the religious dimensions of the NOI. Likewise, it was Lincoln's

⁷⁶ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 248.

⁷⁷ Howard-Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Struggle*, 122.

⁷⁸ See, C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994). This text was originally published in 1961. Lincoln later revised his position and insisted that the NOI was religious.

erroneous conclusion that the NOI was a sociopolitical group and not a religious group (This was also Essien-Udom's conclusion in the book that followed Lincoln's).⁷⁹ The most obvious chauvinism in King's statement is the denial of anything legitimate about the NOI. Instead, it only existed because of the failures of Christianity. To an extent, Malcolm, like Muhammad, was responding to these caricatures of NOI religion.

The second metaphor that signified black bodies that had been "whitenized" ideologically by the social system and fixed *in-place*, for Malcolm, was that of the "conk." The conk was a process by which black men straightened their hair to resemble white men's hair that Malcolm associated with lower-class African Americans, in the early 1940s. He noticed the style in the Boston ghetto. Part of his attraction to the conk was facilitated by the negative meaning that he attached to his natural hair that he referred to depreciatively as "kinky."⁸⁰ As a teenager, Malcolm had moved from Michigan to Boston to live with his sister Ella. He explains his first encounter with the conk, when he observed:

The sharp-dressed young 'cats' who hung on the corners and in the poolrooms, bars, and restaurants, and who obviously didn't work anywhere, completely entranced me. I couldn't get over marveling at how their hair was straight and shiny like white men's hair; Ella told me this was called a 'conk.'⁸¹

⁷⁹ E. U. Essien-Udom. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁸⁰ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 41, 53-4, 56-7.

⁸¹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 45.

Conking was done through a “painful” process that required Red Devil lye, two eggs, two medium-sized white potatoes, and Vaseline.⁸² Malcolm was willing to endure the pain of applying this concoction because, as he reports, he had internalized white standards of beauty, the ideal of which is represented by blond hair and blue eyes—what Cornel West called the “normative gaze.”⁸³ Malcolm interprets his experience of conking and the meaning of the conk:

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking ‘white’ reflected in the mirror in Shorty’s room. I vowed that I’d never again be without a conk, and I never was for many years. . . . It was my first real step toward self-degradation: when I endured all that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that black people are ‘inferior’ and that white people are ‘superior’—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards. . . . Conk—the emblem of shame that he is black.⁸⁴

The conk, then, was a symbol that African American men had totally sold out to the system—completely bought into the notion that they were inferior. Malcolm’s emphasis on the pain of the process is emblematic of both the deep-rooted injury to the black

⁸² Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 55.

⁸³ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 53-4.

⁸⁴ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 56-7; Compare, 264.

psyche vis-à-vis whiteness that the conk represents but also the desire to reflect a white aesthetic that was so pervasive that one would be willing to endure physical agony to “achieve acceptability.” The ultimate parallel and cultural extension of this conk as a symbol is the adoration of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus.

This white Jesus represented the pinnacle of brainwashing, for Malcolm. Malcolm gives an example of the type of remonstrance that he would offer Negro Christians when he would go “fishing,” or engage in proselytizing them. He had to fashion an approach specifically for them. He would say, for instance:

Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fashion our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We’re worshipping a Jesus that doesn’t even *look* like us! Oh, yes! Now just bear with me, listen to the teachings of the Messenger of Allah, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Now, just think of this. The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that’s *his* God, the white man’s God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we’re *dead*, while this white man has milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on *this* earth!⁸⁵

This type of polemic was meant to make an absurdity out of the white Christian ideology that had “brainwashed” millions of African Americans into inferiority complexes. That is, the white Jesus represented the same type of damage to the black psyche as did the

⁸⁵ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 224.

conk. Furthermore, Malcolm notes here that this ideology has concrete affects in that it serves to fix black life options and socioeconomic realities in a position that is subservient to that of whites.

In other words, the embedded racial codes in the worship of a white Jesus as well as the conk have functioned in service of white domination and to give it ultimate significance (at least in the case of the white Jesus). Malcolm suggests that this is an intentional machination that has everyday consequences:

Look at not only how *you* live, but look at how anybody that you *know* lives—that way, you'll be sure that you're not just a bad-luck accident. And when you get through looking at where *you* live, then you take a walk down across Central Park, and start to look what this white God has brought to the white man. I mean take yourself a look down there at how the white man is living!⁸⁶

Malcolm's approach attempted to reveal how whiteness functioned surreptitiously and was manifested, embodied, in the ocular sense as a gaze upon Jesus and literally as an alteration of black bodies in the form of conking. Again, worshipping a white Jesus and conking resulted from the same self-abnegation and inculcation of white supremacy. The cultural equivalent of the conk for black women, Malcolm suggests, was the wearing of blond wigs in particular, but also the loud and extravagant colors of platinum, pink, red, and purple.⁸⁷ Furthermore, he also reaffirmed his conflicting class consciousness, given that while he denied identifying with middle-class African Americans, he was critical,

⁸⁶ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 224-5.

⁸⁷ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 57.

like Muhammad, of the values and behavior of the lower classes, insisting that he respected “upper-class Negroes,” who never conked their hair.⁸⁸

The reflections above indicate some of Malcolm’s later thinking on the subject of black features and hair, in relationship to a cultural context that viewed them as devalued. But this is consistent with the colorism and negative issues that he had with black features that runs throughout his thought. In 1962, he still evidenced the internalized residual effects of western acculturation, which gets reproduced in Muhammad’s narrative on Yakub.⁸⁹ The following is an excerpt from Malcolm’s lecture:

Our people were soft; they were black *but* soft and delicate, fine. They had straight hair. Right here on this Earth you find some of them look like that today. They are black as night, but their hair is like silk, and originally *all* our people had that kind of hair. But Africa, and living in the open, living a jungle life, eating all kinds of food had an effect on the appearance of our people.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 57.

⁸⁹ See my Chapter Two for a detailed summary of the Yakub Myth. Also note that the spelling of “Yacub” is variant. It appears in this text as “Yacub” rather than “Yakub” but both appear in NOI literature. See, Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 48, where the spelling is rendered “Yacub.”

⁹⁰ Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 48. Notice the contrast: “black BUT” soft, delicate, and fine as if black was in conflict with these characteristics.

Malcolm X goes on to say that “nappy hair”⁹¹ is a result of “living in a rough climate”⁹² and that the remnants of this primordial hair can be seen in the eyebrows of black people, which are straight-haired. Notice also the use of the phrase, “black as night,” to describe some African American complexions—a negative image, but the use of the term “silk”—a designation of wealth, status, and privilege to depict hair that was “Caucasoid” (remember the conk resembles white hair for Malcolm). Moreover, he uses the appellation “nappy,” a derogatory label for typical black hair that he explains as a degradation of original black features.

Finally, the apparent conflict between Malcolm’s reference to and detailed exegesis of the Yakub narrative in this 1962 lecture and Taylor’s contention that he moved away, in the late 1950s and early 1960s,⁹³ from such reliance on the theology of Muhammad in lieu of the goal of reaching middle-class African Americans and building the NOI membership, requires some explanation. Although Taylor’s point, it seems, is well founded, the tension may be alleviated if we consider the fact that the speech above was delivered to a group of NOI adherents in Malcolm’s own temple, not at a Christian Church, a college or university, or a public forum in which such imagery and eccentric language may have been scoffed at as mere fantasy.

⁹¹ A term that has negative connotations.

⁹² Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 48.

⁹³ See, Taylor, “Premillennuim Tension.”

Under such circumstances, Taylor's thesis may have been challenged.⁹⁴ To the contrary, this example may serve to demonstrate Malcolm's savviness and gifted insight, that he was aware of the potential negative responses to the Yakub saga and employed a strategic dissemblance. Notwithstanding, the issue of mechanical hair alterations and the conk, in particular, was a symbol African Americans' deep indoctrination into the values and aesthetics of white Americans. Both of these metaphors, "black bodies with white heads" and the "conk," were discourses that created apertures for the exercise of his own agency and recalcitrance, made necessary by the cultural limitations placed on black existence generally and, more specifically, by the religious restrictions and interdictions of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, his leader and spiritual guide.⁹⁵

Malcolm X on the Religion and Praxis of Elijah Muhammad: Conflict and Critique

Malcolm expressed growing frustration about the constrictions on his agency, indeed, the power and control over his body, exerted by Muhammad and the NOI. To a certain extent, one could argue that much of the ritual and discursive control over Malcolm's activities, as well as over the actions of NOI members or anyone else for that matter, would have not have been possible without Malcolm's consent. Nevertheless, as

⁹⁴ Taylor, "Premillennium Tension," 64.

⁹⁵ Malcolm X, *February 1965*, 177-9. Malcolm mentions that he was under some control of Muhammad in existed in something akin to a deep daze, until after he left the NOI and woke up.

David Howard-Pitney concludes, Malcolm began to experience the deleterious consequences of such containment:

Even while advocating the Nation of Islam, however, Malcolm began to chafe under Elijah Muhammad's strict prohibitions against his followers engaging in any protest against white authorities. By 1963, Malcolm wished seriously to engage in the cresting Civil Rights movement, but, despite the Nation of Islam's denunciation of whites, like many sectarian groups, it instructed believers to withdraw from, not engage with, the larger society. It was for Allah, not *them*, to take revenge on the white race.⁹⁶

At its most basic level, Malcolm's desire alone to join the Civil Rights movement and his resentment of Muhammad's failure to engage whites bodily represented an implied critique of the theology and apolitical posture of Muhammad and the NOI.

As noted in the previous section, Malcolm grew restless with what we have called Muhammad's religious and symbolic *out-of-placeness*. He believed that the NOI—if truth be told—his own black body, should have been *out-of-place* socially, that they

⁹⁶ Howard-Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Struggle*, 12.

Howard-Pitney, at times, offers interesting conclusions regarding a comparison between Martin and Malcolm. Unfortunately, his biases are obvious in the terms he uses to describe Malcolm and the NOI—for example, referring to their beliefs as “cultic” and “bizarre” (10) and utilizing terms such as “true Islam” (13, 18) in contrast to NOI religion.

should be involved with the civil rights activities, *physically*, by way of protest, voting and political activities, and if need be, by defense of black communities.

Furthermore, Malcolm thought that the NOI should challenge the socially constructed boundaries of acceptable black activity that was tied to cosmology and seen as the fixed social order. He desired to challenge such an order through aggressive responses and protests. At the same time, he thought that Muhammad and the NOI were inordinately heavy handed in its treatment of rival and “apostate” African Americans and showed undue restraint with whites, often justifying the inactivity with eschatological claims that suggested that Allah would deal with them later. James H. Cone, author of *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?*,⁹⁷ illustrates this contention:

Elijah Muhammad, along with most of his ministers, did not share Malcolm’s political philosophy. Elijah consistently refused to allow Malcolm to involve the Nation in the politics of the civil rights movement. The Nation’s nonengagement policy caused many blacks to say: ‘Those Muslims *talk* tough but they never *do* nothing [*sic*], unless somebody bothers Muslims.’ The Muslims’ acts of physical retaliation were meted out primarily in the black community (especially toward persons who left the Nation), and only *verbal* retaliation was directed toward whites. For example, when the Los Angeles police invaded a Muslim temple, killing a minister and wounding several other people, Muhammad did not allow Malcolm to implement the Black Muslim philosophy of retaliation. Instead he

⁹⁷ James H. Cone. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

instructed his followers to leave the vengeance to God. As a result several young members whom Malcolm had recruited left the Nation, greatly disappointed with its passive response to blatant police brutality. Even Malcolm found Muhammad's claim that God would punish the white man for his evil deeds difficult to accept and to explain to others.⁹⁸

Malcolm grew impatient with such a philosophy to the extent that it became difficult for him to conceal his feelings.⁹⁹ He also became aware and embarrassed by remarks of black communities regarding the disparate responses, as Cone points out, by the NOI to white people and to black people, with the latter being much more violent and aggressive.

As elucidated above, Malcolm believed that the NOI should defend itself and retaliate in response to acts of violence against it, even if the perpetrators of such attacks were white. Again, his mounting frustration with the NOI was a passive-aggressive critique of Muhammad's millenarianism in that he no longer found satisfaction in the in the apocalyptic pronouncements that the cataclysmic end of the age of the white man was coming and that the glory of the black race would be realized at the appearance of the Mother Plane. Malcolm would admit this dissatisfaction to other ministers within the NOI¹⁰⁰ and to the public. In his own words:

Elijah believes that God is going to come and straighten things out. I believe that too. But whereas Elijah is willing to sit and wait, I'm not willing to sit and wait

⁹⁸ Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 186.

⁹⁹ Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 186-7.

¹⁰⁰ Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 186.

on God to come. If he doesn't come soon, it will be too late. I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to eliminate some of these things, and make a paradise here on earth while we're waiting on the other.¹⁰¹

Malcolm suggests that conceptually he believes in a God who will eschatologically attend to social and political inequalities and the injustices that African Americans and colonized people have experienced. But he insists that his form of belief, unlike Muhammad's, does not lead to a quietism that makes socio-political engagement irrelevant due to the belief that human activity will be immaterial since God will handle such issues. Malcolm's words also indicate a subtle doubt in God's immanent engagement of the world—that God may not eradicate racism or at least not in time (qualitatively there is no difference in the two). Moreover, he reinforces the priority of social *out-of-placeness*—that religious black bodies should stand up to and face the exigencies of their day.

Michael A. Gomez argues, in error, that the “initial fissure” between Malcolm and Muhammad came as a result of Malcolm's decision in 1963 investigate independently the rumors of Muhammad's sexual liaisons and extramarital children, stating, “His very decision to investigate the rumors by interviewing several secretaries rather than first going to Mr. Muhammad is instructive in that it represents an initial fissure in his faith in

¹⁰¹ Malcolm X, *February 1965*, 22.

Mr. Muhammad.”¹⁰² While Gomez details many of the earlier events mentioned in this chapter in which Malcolm questioned Muhammad’s judgment and theology, he fails to recognize that they denote not only an ideological and theological shift in his thinking, more important, they signify an affective rupture in the psychic bond between him and his mentor—that Malcolm, despite overt signs of loyalty, was beginning to evince emotional distance in their relationship prior to this “investigation.” Furthermore, Gomez misses two other important issues. First, he does not take into account the fact that Malcolm may have known about Muhammad’s infidelities as early as 1955.¹⁰³ Second, he does not take into consideration that the more pressing issue in the “fissure” between Malcolm and Muhammad may have involved contestation over female love interests (see Chapter Seven).¹⁰⁴

Malcolm’s dissatisfaction with Muhammad’s decisions was no mere triviality. The very presence of his discontentment signals doubt about the core beliefs of the

¹⁰² Michael A. Gomez. *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 358.

¹⁰³ Marable, *Living Black History*, 173; Karl Evanzz. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 175-7.

¹⁰⁴ In Chapter Seven, I discuss in some detail the issues between Malcolm X and Evelyn X Williams, whom he loved, and Elijah Muhammad, who impregnated her. This, I suggest was the real “initial fissure” between Malcolm and Muhammad, given that Malcolm knew of Muhammad’s liaisons with women for more than a decade, and he remained a faithful member and leader within the NOI.

Nation (i.e., Yakub) and about their relevance to the African American struggle. In other words, his longing to join the active protest for justice and equality suggests a nascent disbelief of the Yakub-Mother Plane/Mother Ship discourse.¹⁰⁵ The primary justification for Muhammad's and the NOI's lack of involvement in any of the existing movements, including the budding black power and black conscious movements, was that it was unnecessary, since Allah's destruction of this white world by the Mother Plane was imminent.¹⁰⁶

The behavioral corollary, this project has argued, was that Muhammad privileged the symbolic over the social—that black bodies were the recipient and carriers of religious meanings by way of discourses like Yakub that valorized them. This meant, among other things, that these bodies were clandestine and detached from mainstream public life, and indeed, the NOI was a separatist religious organization. Since the Mother Ship was the vehicle by which the world would be destroyed and by which the new peaceful world would be generated, the NOI did not require its members to engage corrupt social systems bodily (i.e., socially). Quite the contrary, Muhammad forbade his members to vote, to participate in activist groups, and severely limited their interaction with whites and civic groups.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Two for a detailed discussion and Chapter Three for its significance for black bodies for Muhammad.

¹⁰⁶ Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes's Problem*, Vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1997).

While a member of the Nation, Malcolm's progressive disenchantment was tenuously ameliorated by his prominent stature that afforded him the opportunity for existential transcendence even if only temporarily, and he was able to find meaning by countering the limitations placed on him by Muhammad in two areas. These practices had direct bearing on black bodies in the NOI, including his own body. First, Malcolm X made black bodies in the NOI visible through his tireless proselytic work. It was he who was responsible for the growth of the NOI after he joined the movement in the early 1950s, ultimately making the group known to the general public. Albeit accounts of the NOI membership have always been scant, scholarship universally agrees that it was his efforts that led to the increase in members and in temples.¹⁰⁷ One scholar suggests that Muhammad had forty temples and four hundred members when Malcolm joined the Nation in 1952. Primarily due to Malcolm's efforts, NOI temples may have numbered one hundred, and the membership may have swelled to forty thousand by 1964.¹⁰⁸

Malcolm gained visibility in his role as missionary and temple planter, and he may have considered himself the NOI's answer to Evangelist Billy Graham in his efforts to make disciples and establish NOI temples all across the country:

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross*, 186, 189; DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 100; Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 356.

¹⁰⁸ David Leigh. *Circuitous Journey: Modern Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 138. These numbers vary. Some suggest that the NOI had as many as 20,000 members and as many as 250,000 members. Cf. Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 356.

Malcolm apparently kept an eye on Billy Graham, and had probably done so from the time of his incarceration. Graham had burst upon the national scene at the end of 1949, when an evangelistic campaign he was leading in Los Angeles won the attention of the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who used his publications to make Graham famous virtually overnight. After an extended crusade in Los Angeles, which lasted seven weeks, Graham's next stop was Boston, where Malcolm was incarcerated. Graham's crusade in Boston in early 1950 was equally spectacular, and it is hard to imagine that the incarcerated Malcolm did not become aware of the daily newspaper reports concerning the rising star of evangelical Christianity. If nothing else, thereafter Malcolm studied Billy Graham's evangelistic techniques, and when he finally embarked on his own crusade on behalf of Muhammad, he emulated the evangelist in one significant respect. . . he employed the Billy Graham crusade method of acting as a supportive agent of the church. . . Indeed, it is possible that Malcolm X inwardly perceived himself as a counterpart to Billy Graham.¹⁰⁹

That Malcolm may have seen himself as the counterpart to Billy Graham also says something about his self-consciousness—that he thrived off his sense of freedom and agency, that his was the most successful and fulfilled when he was able to function with a degree of freedom, such as he did with temple planting. This image of himself as the black Billy Graham may also point to a desire on his part for the prominence and recognition that Graham's type of missionization afforded him. Nonetheless, having been

¹⁰⁹ DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross*, 185-6.

directly involved in all or nearly all of the temple or mosques that had been established since 1952 gave him a “virtual omnipresence,”¹¹⁰ given that even in his absence his generative presence, his creative finger, loomed large. A scholar notes that “Malcolm X figures prominently because without him the Nation of Islam would have never have achieved its status—in terms of membership or influence.”¹¹¹ It was through Malcolm that the NOI gained visibility and through proselytic work that he was able to manipulate his vicarious position as one whose body was “controlled” through the power relations enacted through Muhammad’s ritual jurisdiction.

The second practice that allowed Malcolm to transcend his bodily constrictions was his use of the language of remonstrance, much of which has already been illustrated in this chapter in his use of metaphors and in his speeches such as “Message to the Grassroots” in which he intentionally or not challenged the parochialism of Muhammad through advocating a broadened international and national coalition of people, who were not Muslims, who could then combat oppression. His use of language to transcend his own circumstances was especially poignant regarding his criticism of the Civil Rights movement.

My contention here is that through the materiality of language, that is, language as embodied and material, Malcolm was able to create a social world and an identity in which he *appeared* as an active participant in the struggle for justice and equality even

¹¹⁰ DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 110.

¹¹¹ Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, 35.

though on the surface his overt language of critique would seem merely symbolic.¹¹²

Language (*nommo*) is creative and generative. To that end, Both George Yancy, advancing the linguistic theories of Geneva Smitherman,¹¹³ and Judith Butler insist that language does more than just *says* something, it *does* something, that is, performs it, and represents it as already constituted,¹¹⁴ so that in our case, Malcolm was not simply “saying something” when he spoke about civil rights—in a sense, he was “*there*.” In fact, one could argue that his vociferous, often circumlocutious, pronouncements in opposition to many of the practices of the Civil Rights movement, such as its commitment to nonviolence, in part, reflected Malcolm’s desire to insert his himself into the their social activities as a theorist and agent of change, who was constricted by the jurisdiction of Muhammad’s NOI. Malcolm, not only used the spoken word, he also utilized written language through his own newspaper columns and by way of his founding of “Muhammad Speaks,” a periodical of the NOI, in which he was a major contributor.

Malcolm desired to be present bodily in the political process, and language (as a material extension of his physical body) allowed him to transcend his constraints and to

¹¹² Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge: New York and London, 1993), 31-2; George Yancy. “Geneva Smitherman: The Social Ontology of African American Language, the Power of *Nommo*, and the Resistance and Identity Through Language.” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18.4 (2004): 273-99.

¹¹³ See, for example, Geneva Smitherman. *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Rev. Ed. (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

¹¹⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10, 13; Yancy, “Geneva Smitherman” 277-8.

be “present” bodily in the struggle for justice. His speech (December 4, 1963)¹¹⁵ entitled “God’s Judgment of White America (The Chickens Are Coming Home to Roost),¹¹⁶ offers poignant illustrations:

Among whites here in America, the political teams are no longer divided into Democrats and Republicans. The whites who are now struggling for control of the American political throne are divided into ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ camps. The white liberals from both parties cross party lines to work together toward the same goals, and white conservatives from both parties do likewise. The white liberal differs from the white conservative only in one way: the liberal is more deceitful than the conservative. The liberal is more hypocritical than the conservative. Both want power, but the white liberal is the one who has perfected the art of posing as the Negro’s friend and benefactor. . .¹¹⁷

It seems apparent that Malcolm X indeed saw the world differently from Muhammad and that he wrestled with the interdictions against direct political action. We inferred from this that he may have been having his doubts about the NOI’s foundational cosmology and mythology which suggested that such activity was unnecessary because the Mother Plane, as Muhammad taught, would set the world order straight when it arrived to establish black people as the rightful heirs of the planet.

¹¹⁵ Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 121-48.

¹¹⁷ Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 133.

Above, Malcolm inserts himself directly into the milieu of American public life through political commentary about the shift in the nature of American politics of affiliation vis-à-vis race and African Americans, and he suggests that both Republicans and Democrats are part of the same system but that the “new” nomenclatures “conservative” (Republicans) and “liberal” (Democrats) are deceptive. He seems to respect the conservatives more because they are more forthcoming about who they are and what they want while liberals play a “game,”¹¹⁸ making African Americans that they serve their interests while concealing the fact that black people are really “pawn[s]”¹¹⁹ in whites’ own self-interests. In the end, he makes his own body visible through this rhetorical act and his longing for direct confrontation with the system, and he implicitly demarcates the distinction between his own view of the world and that of his mentor.

Malcolm’s use of language was a departure from his spiritual leader in that even through Muhammad’s critique of black bodies *in-place*, Muhammad seemed to have no overt desire to effect the direction of the movement or to join it. Furthermore, it may have served a psychological factor for his followers in that it could give them a sense of security—that they were indeed in the right religious organization. More importantly, through Muhammad’s criticism, he was performing “Messengership,” for lack of a better word—demonstrating to his followers that he alone embodied the truth of God.

Malcolm’s use language, on the other hand, was a means of affecting and effectively participating in the Civil Rights movement surreptitiously. To that end, this chapter has

¹¹⁸ Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 133.

¹¹⁹ Malcolm X. *The End of White World Supremacy*, 133.

argued that this was yet another implied critique of Muhammad that spoke to the core (at times unconscious) doubt that he had regarding the most central precepts of the NOI eschatology and by extension and contrary to other accounts the divine inspiration of his mentor.

Unable to justify his commitment to the NOI and his belief that it could be a great political force in America¹²⁰ with his growing desire for active participation in political activities, Malcolm grew increasingly disgruntled. He began to see the NOI as a force that worked increasingly against his own bodily agency. Malcolm attempted to employ his own recalcitrance while in the Nation (Muhammad did let him critique Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement in a limited sense), but when such exercise was seen to cross the constraining boundaries of the NOI, he was summarily interdicted.

According to David J. Leigh,

Elijah Muhammad refuses to allow Malcolm X to speak out on political issues or become engaged in the civil rights movement. When Malcolm X does speak out, he is abruptly censored and isolated, thus forced to withdraw into himself as he had done in early adolescence.¹²¹

The clearest evidence for Malcolm's fundamental disagreement with and critique of Muhammad's orientation toward black bodies (i.e., privileging symbolic *out-of-placeness*) can be seen in the many things he said (and did) immediately after he

¹²⁰ Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 187.

¹²¹ Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys*, 148.

withdrew from the Nation officially in 1964.¹²² In a New York Times (February 22, 1965) interview Malcolm proclaims:

I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control. I feel that what I'm thinking and saying is now for myself. Before it was for and by the guidance of Elijah Muhammad. Now I think with my own mind, sir!¹²³

While what happened after Malcolm's defection from the NOI is somewhat outside the purview of this chapter, that he advocated voting, self-defense, and coalition building, is clearly germane, since it indicates his immediate response to Muhammad and therefore had to reveal convictions that he held prior to leaving the Nation. However, relevant personal issues of gender and sexuality (even Malcolm's own) that exacerbated the philosophical differences between Muhammad and Malcolm will be explored in Chapter Seven, the final chapter of this project, because they will be important to understanding the black body in the history of the NOI and the ways in which women's bodies and sexuality are constituted in the religion.

Conclusion

The image of Malcolm X has been reified in American popular culture and in scholarship as a paragon of black masculinity that is often used in ways that may be

¹²² Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 287. Evanzz reports that Malcolm announced his break with the NOI on the Today Show (NBC) on August 8, 1964.

¹²³ Malcolm X, *February 1965*, 179

inconsistent with Malcolm's life. What gets effectively obfuscated is Malcolm the human being and his personal relationships, including those with his mentor, Elijah Muhammad. Little attention is given to his religious life prior to leaving the Nation of Islam and the ways in which much of his early theology and philosophy was consistent with the mythology and theology of Muhammad. What is sacrificed in such an approach is not only the opportunity to examine the ways in which Malcolm appropriated these religious teachings but the ways in which Malcolm challenged and critiqued his religious leader through his own activity and affective and intellectual responses to such discursive and ritual bodily control while he was yet a member of the Nation. Much fascination and lore has been constructed around his subsequent "conversion" to Sunni Islam.

This chapter has attempted to uncover the tension between Malcolm's ostensible agreement with Muhammad's religious teachings and his visceral reactions and political desires that may indicate a strong ambivalence at best and at worst subtle and implied disbelief with which he wrestled for several years while still a member of the Nation. In fact, we have argued that Malcolm X, while in basic agreement with Elijah Muhammad that black bodies were physical and symbolic, reversed or privileged the social over the symbolic. His growing desire was to be an active participant in the Civil Rights movement, and at a certain point it was impossible to reconcile that desire, that sense of calling and belonging, with the Yakub-Mother Ship discourse that, given its millenarian and apocalyptic orientation, made direct political agitation irrelevant in a world in which evil white devils would ultimately be destroyed and in which a new world would be constituted as the perfect black utopia. In Muhammad's worldview, at the coming of the

Mother Plane, black bodies in the NOI would be unveiled and constituted as physically and symbolically sublime and ultimate.

Malcolm's longing to participate actively in the freedom struggle was an implied critique of Muhammad's most fundamental precepts, and his reversal of the ways in which black bodies were most recalcitrant and "black," that is, through direct, aggressive, sociopolitical activity and self-defense was irreconcilable with Muhammad's project. This was not the only grounds for Malcolm's defection or expulsion from the NOI and his eventual demise. Some of the more personal, rather than ideological, reasons will be broached in a later chapter. Suffice it to say that the purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate that Malcolm both struggled for his own bodily agency while within the Nation and understood the nature of agential black bodies characteristically different from Muhammad, and that in both of these is an implied but pronounced critique of the basic beliefs and practices of the organization that he held so dear.

Chapter Five

Warith Deen Mohammed¹ and the Nation of Islam: Race and the Symbolic Valorization of Black Bodies *Out-of-Place* in “Islamic” Form

Chapter One engaged in a complex exploration of the construction of the black body through Western discourses and American practices such as slavery and lynching. The chapter defined the body as the material locus of the self and as the symbolization of a given collective culture and cosmology, in other words, as biological and as symbolic. Following that, it advanced a theory of the black body, called “black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*,” that frames this study. The chapter suggested that black bodies could be *in-place* and *out-of-place* socially and symbolically. Black bodies *in-place* symbolically might be, for instance, those bodies that acquiesced to the racist definitions of blackness

¹ Wallace D. Muhammad announced that he had changed his name to Warith Deen Muhammad in 1980. For the purposes of this chapter, we will use his present name, Warith. See, Martha F. Lee. *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 97; Compare *Bilalian News*, March 14, 1980. He currently uses what he calls the legal spelling “Mohammed,” although he says, “And Waarith Ud-Deen—we say Wallace, but Waarith Ud-Deen means inheritor of the religion or faith of Muhammad.” Adilah Dawan. *The New Unabridged Edition/Source Index English & Arabic Historical Glossary Words Defined by Imam W. Deen Mohammed*, Volume 1, 1975-78 (Chicago: QHB Publishing & Design, 2005), 92 cf. 91.

by the social system, like Malcolm's X's "black bodies with white heads," which he understood as selling out or buying into black inferiority ideologically. Black bodies *in-place* socially entails physical bodies maintaining boundaries of acceptability in terms of bodily activities and geographical considerations, like not being in the "wrong" neighborhoods or engaging in relationships across "racial" lines, etc. Along those same lines, black bodies *out-of-place* symbolically involve intellectual, attitudinal, and/or emotionally oppositional (i.e., symbolic acts) that are seen to challenging, critiquing, or resisting domination or racialized discourses and definitions that attach negative meanings to black bodies. Moreover, black bodies can be *out-of-place* socially, meaning that such bodies are perceived physically to have crossed boundaries of acceptable behavior or bodies that fail to conform to socially determined categories of behavior. Such symbolic and social *out-of-placeness* is perceived as *dangerous* by those, whose interests are protected by the regulation of *other* bodies. Finally, Chapter One explored the history of the NOI, pointing to significant moments in the ministries of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan that indicated the centrality of the black body in the rituals and discourses of their ministries.

Chapter Two described Elijah Muhammad's critique of black bodies *in-place*—the black bodies that for him represented the racist social system in that they had been ideologically, symbolically, "whitenized" by Christianity, a religion that whites used to create slaves and to maintain the system of slavery. The epitome of black bodies *in-place* were so-called Negro preachers. Chapter Three investigates Muhammad's construction of ideal black bodies in which he drew upon discursive and ritual sources to fashion "beautiful" black bodies that transcended the racist stereotypes of this-worldly space (*ad*

dunya). To accomplish this, he drew upon esoteric and mythological sources. The chapter concludes by arguing that Muhammad privileged the symbolic over the social in order to constitute such enclavist sublime bodies. Chapter Four contends that Malcolm X reversed or inverted Muhammad's paradigm by privileging the social over the symbolic, or at least giving greater attention to it in that for him, black bodies should literally be engaged in social activity in service of their own liberation and that these bodies find their meaning, not in private religious settings, but in agential engagement with the racist social system. These ideas, the chapter argues, is an implied critique of Muhammad's millenarian theology and mythology.

Chapter Five will argue that Warith Deen Mohammed (aka Wallace D. Muhammad), in his appropriation of Sunni Islam for the NOI, critiqued both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X in his construction of black ("Islamic") bodies *out-of-place*. On the one hand, he disagreed with his father, Muhammad, in that for him, Islam was something much more concrete and fixed (e.g., the Five Pillars) and not esoteric and "spooky."² Furthermore, religion was not something private and exclusive as it was for Muhammad—it was universal. But this Sunni notion of the universality (*ummah*) of religion also posed problems for Mohammad, who also recognized the affects of racism on African Americans, and he sought to address their particular (*asabiya*) needs with a

² Martha F. Lee. *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Movement* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 92. See also, *Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 1976, 38.

relevant form of Islam.³ This chapter will argue that attention to and assault on racism was an attempt to recast black bodies symbolically in order to dislodge them from the negative meanings of inferiority that were attached to them vis-à-vis the racist social system, including its discourses and practices. His desire to see African Americans “cultured” through and in Islam was a response that was meant to disrupt the reproduction of black bodies *in-place* symbolically. His emphasis on diet, proper attire, clean living, as well as voting and participation in social activism and the political process infers his significant but unequal concern for black (physical) bodies socially.

In doing so, however, Mohammed critiqued Malcolm X for whom religion and social responsibility were viewed as somewhat separate (necessitating Malcolm to found the Muslim Mosque, Inc. [religious] and the Organization for Afro-American Unity [sociopolitical]). In the end, Mohammed embraced a distinctive tradition within African American Islam and the NOI in particular, consistent, not in conflict, with Muhammad and Malcolm X that held the ostensible universal (i.e., Islam) and the obvious particularism (i.e., race) in tension. That is, the body and the significance of race remained the central focus of the religious meanings that he employed through his transition to a manner of religion that more closely related to international forms of Sunni Islam. As such, this chapter suggests that the incessant attention to race in his early years indicate his privileging, like his father, of the symbolic over the social.⁴

³ Amina Beverly McCloud. *African American Islam* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 37-8.

⁴ At the same time, like Malcolm, at least, he recognizes the importance of the social.

Yet, Mohammed was not necessarily the putative successor to his father's leadership. How he ascended to the top position would play an important theological role in the direction he would take the Nation. The ascension of Mohammed to the leadership position in the NOI represented somewhat of a coup. Louis Farrakhan had positioned himself to be the next chief of the Nation of Islam prior to Muhammad's death on February 25, 1975.⁵ He, seemingly, held the credentials and the symbols that would allow him to move smoothly into the lead role after Muhammad's demise. Like, Malcolm X who was also expected to succeed Muhammad until he was expelled from the Nation and then assassinated, he was the National Representative of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. In addition, he was the Minister of Harlem's Temple #7, the most prestigious post in the Nation, second in importance only to Chicago's Temple #2, the NOI's international headquarters—a sure sign that he was the next in line to lead the Nation. In fact, the similarities to Malcolm are many, as scholar Lawrence Mamiya notes:

If anyone in the Muslim movement closely resembles Malcolm X in career and style it is Minister Louis Farrakhan. Although he is shorter than Malcolm in physical appearance, he is also fair-skinned as Malcolm was. Both of their

⁵ Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 176; Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 75. Clifton E. Marsh. *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham MD and London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 69. However, Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 422, lists Muhammad's death as February 24, 1975, apparently in error.

mothers came from the Caribbean Islands. Born in the Bronx, but raised in Boston, Minister Farrakhan's career path is almost exactly the same as Malcolm's. Malcolm was influential in Farrakhan's conversion from professional musician (violinist) and calypso singer to minister in the Nation. Minister Louis X took over the Boston mosque which Malcolm founded, and later, after the split, he was awarded Temple No. 7 in Harlem, the most important pastorate in the Nation after the Chicago headquarters... They also started newspapers for the Nation.⁶

Clearly, some of the similarities between Malcolm X and Farrakhan are uncanny. Furthermore, as argued in Chapter Three, in a fashion similar to that of Malcolm X (Chapter Four), Farrakhan approximated Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy in that he was male, heterosexual, masculine, middle-class, light complexioned, mystical-esoteric, and healthy. These factors, more than anything else, may participate in determining leadership and prominence in the NOI.⁷ Of course, other important features

⁶ Lawrence H. Mamiya. "From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of a Movement." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21.2 (1982): 141.

⁷ I would also argue that this same ideal black bodily economy will to a large degree help to determine who will succeed Minister Louis Farrakhan in the leadership of the Nation. It seems logical, then that Ishmael Muhammad, leader of Chicago's Temple #2 (Mosque Miriam) is the most prominent candidate with one crucial distinction that sets him eminently above anyone else—being the son of Elijah Muhammad and his former secretary Tynetta (Nelson) Muhammad, he is a member of the "Royal Family."

include rhetorical and leadership abilities and charisma. What this signals is the operation of a matrix of bodily factors that function to determine leadership within the Nation (See Chapter Seven). When these characteristics are seen as more or less equal between two candidates, as was the case with Mohammed and Farrakhan, then the mediating factor that would determine succession would involve how successfully how one manipulates power to his/her advantage to achieve desired positions.

To this end, Muhammad's demise put the Nation in an awkward position of having to determine the succession of a man who was supposedly Allah's final messenger, in a manner not unlike Sunni interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad Ibn-Abdullah as the Seal of the Prophets (*khatm*) or the final prophet who fulfills the meaning or is the final revelation of all those who came before him.⁸ Members of the Nation

⁸ This is an important feature of early African American Islam that ties it thematically to leadership in West African Islam, that is, the co-optation of the titles of the Prophet Muhammad, especially that of "Seal of the Prophets" (*khatm*) and "Pole of the Universe" (*Qutb*). By way of comparison, I would point to Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad in America and Ahmed Al-Tijani, Al-Hajj Umar, and Shehu Usman Dan Fodio in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West Africa. Cf. Jamil M. Abun-Nasr. *The Tijaniyya: A Sufi Order in the Modern World* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 15-18; 28-35; John Ralph Willis. *In the Path of Allah: The Passion of Al-Hajj Umar: An Essay into the Nature of Charisma in Islam* (London: Frank Cass, 1989), 29-49; Mervyn Hiskett. *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of Shehu Usman dan Fodio* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 161.

found, in Mohammed's own narrative, reasons that made it convenient, if not expedient, to appoint him the leader of the movement. For example, numerology played a role and mystical thinking played a part in the decision to appoint him. Mohammed had been his father's seventh-born child, which was thought to signify something special about him. In addition, Mohammed was the only child born after the arrival of the founder of the NOI. Moreover, he ("Wallace Deen Muhammad") was named after the founder Wallace D. Fard Muhammad. According to Imam Mohammed (July 25, 1979):

The power of mystery. The other children were already born when Fard Muhammad came. I was the only child born during his stay with us. I was chosen because a new baby, new birth—they wanted a Christ figure, someone with a mystery about [him]. There was this newborn baby predicted by Fard Muhammad to be a male and so it happened the guess was right. I say a 'guess' not to laugh at our religion. I say 'guess' because that's the language the Honorable Elijah Muhammad used.⁹

Here, Mohammed indicates that part of the reason why he was chosen to lead the NOI after his father's demise was that he represented "mystery," given that Fard predicted his gender. He also indicates that, given the circumstances of his birth, he was endowed by his father (and perhaps Fard) with "spiritual" meaning and significance—that is, he was seen as a "Christ figure." Mattias Gardell explains further:

⁹ Clifton E. Marsh. "Interview with Imam Wallace D. Muhammad." In C. Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 160.

Wallace D. Muhammad was born on October 30, 1933, as the seventh child of Clara and Elijah Muhammad. In the NOI historiography, his birth was surrounded with legends pointing toward the divine purpose of his existence. The number seven has paramount importance, as it symbolizes the reestablishment of black world leadership and stands for perfection, masculinity, the coming of God, and the divine judgment over the unjust. God, in the person of Master Farad Muhammad, had determined the sex of the child before its birth. He then wrote "Wallace" in chalk on the back door in the home of his Messenger-to-be, and foretold that the coming child would succeed his father as spiritual head of the Nation of Islam.¹⁰

Like Mohammed, Gardell reiterates and expands on the mystical implications surrounding Warith's (Wallace's) birth that began the chosen-son narrative upon which the NOI would draw in selecting him as Muhammad's successor. The numerological significance of his birth and the prophetic acts of Master Fard regarding him initiated and contributed to the aura that encircled him throughout his life.

This mystery surrounding him, Mohammad seems to suggest, outweighs the fact that his relationship with his father was volatile and that he was "excommunicated"¹¹ from the Nation on several occasions for being critical of Muhammad's theology and

¹⁰ Mattias Gardell. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 101.

¹¹ Marsh. "Interview with Imam Wallace D. Muhammad," 161.

practice. In fact, one of the episodes of estrangement lasted up until the year before his father's death in 1975:

The longest period of my suspension was between the years of 1964 and 1969. During that time I was stripped of all minister's privileges. In 1966, early 1967 all support—even family relations were denied me. I couldn't even socialize with family members. . . . In '69 things began to warm up. In 1970 I was admitted back. Once right after Malcolm's assassination I was admitted back, but that didn't last very long. I was right back out. I was admitted back in 1970 again. I stay [*sic*] in the good graces of Elijah Muhammad until now. . . . It was back in 1974 that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad accepted me back into the ministry.¹²

Again, in a sense, it seems odd that Mohammad became the leader of the Nation of Islam, since he was constantly in trouble due to his theological and political differences with Muhammad, but maybe his insight is acute when he suggests that he became the successor, in part, due to people's desire for an "heir" (pun intended) of mystery and prophecy. Linking his becoming the chief minister of the NOI to prophesy was a strategic move, as this chapter will demonstrate, that allowed him later to couch his new Sunni teachings in the theology of Muhammad, and to argue that ultimately Sunni Islam was the logical and natural fulfillment of his father's work and Master Fard Muhammad's intentions.

¹² Marsh, "Interview with Imam Wallace D. Muhammad," 162.

On the other hand, perhaps Mohammed was not being wholly forthcoming by locating his rise to prominence in the mystery and prophecy of his predecessors, thereby obfuscating any political moves or power plays that he may have made. For example, Edward Curtis, who also considers it remarkable that Mohammed became the overseer, casts doubt on Mohammed's version of succession, especially since he was expelled from the NOI as many as four times. Curtis maintains:

Given this, it is all the more remarkable and even curious that Wallace eventually inherited the mantle of leadership from his father. While Elijah Muhammad never publicly appointed a successor, he seemed to defer quietly to his son's efforts to secure his right to the throne throughout 1974 and early 1975. In New York, Wallace flatly told National Secretary Abass Rassoull and National Spokesman Louis Farrakhan that he would succeed his father and specifically warned Farrakhan not to interfere.¹³

If Curtis's observations are correct, they contradict the more innocuous description of events that Mohammed enumerates. In fact, it appears that, despite the very different trajectory and theological commitments of the NOI to his own, Mohammed coveted the post and employed strong-arm tactics and manipulation of his paternal relationship to position himself for a successful takeover. These reflections also indicate that, without such a political power play, that Mohammed suspected that Farrakhan, his chief rival,

¹³ Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African American Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 112.

may be the next man to command the group—hence his stern warning to him to watch his step. Curtis,¹⁴ following Mattias Gardell,¹⁵ suggests that Mohammed may have had some assistance positioning himself for leadership from the FBI, from whom he sought protection when he felt his life was in danger after one of his excommunications. Accordingly, the FBI believed that he would be the most desirable leader, for their purposes, to head the NOI.

This chapter is concerned mostly with the years from 1975, when Elijah Muhammad died and his son assumed leadership, to the year 1978, at which point Louis Farrakhan was “excommunicated” from Mohammed’s NOI (then called the World Community of al-Islam in the West [WCIW]) on March 7, 1978¹⁶ and began his own Nation that claimed the authentic legacy of his teacher, Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad.¹⁷ Concurrently, Mohammed continued to move the WCIW toward a

¹⁴ Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 112-3.

¹⁵ Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*.

¹⁶ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 94.

¹⁷ These are important temporal parameters, since Mohammed’s earlier years are much different than his latter. In his later years (d. 2008), Mohammed was one of the most important Muslim leaders in America and one of the more significant in the world. He certainly would not have been considered socially or symbolically *out-of-place* during this period of his life. But this chapter will indicate his awareness that within the first decade after his father’s he was maligned by immigrant Sunni Muslims who accused him of teaching the same doctrines as his father and Fard. In fact, Mohammed resisted and

more globally acceptable form of Islam, until he resigned from the presidency on September 10, 1978 and appointed a council of Imams to run the group.¹⁸ Still, Mohammed continued to consider his group the NOI and embraced this legacy throughout the 1980s, locating all of his teachings in the theology and program of Master Fard Muhammad, and Mohammed's father, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.¹⁹

Named the successor to Elijah Muhammad's NOI on February 26, 1975,²⁰ Mohammed maintained that the group, which became the WCIW on October 18, 1976,²¹ remained the NOI in spite of the changes in leadership and in name. In fact, he claimed to conceive of the WCIW as the resurrection of the NOI, which had fallen from its cultural foundation when he took it over in 1975.²² He explains the transition:

refuted such criticisms by suggesting the importance of his social, historical, and cultural (i.e., "racial") situatedness, and that this particularity determined the form and fashion that Islam would take for him and the African Americans whom he led. During the first decade, in particular the first several years after taking over the leadership of the Nation, he is perceived to be *out-of-place* by Muslims and by Americans because of his critique of racism and his attempts to valorize black bodies.

¹⁸ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 96.

¹⁹ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 81.

²⁰ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 78.

²¹ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 93.

²² Wallace Deen Muhammad. *As the Light Shineth From the East* (Chicago: WDM Publishing Co., 1980), 110.

We decided that we were ready, we have the dedication. We've been in the habit too long to give it up; we have the moral strength to accept the job ahead of us, and we have the courage to act on that moral strength. So the Nation of Islam is not going out of business. We said we're going to stay in business until we can evolve it up a little higher. And that's what we did. We used the Divine principle of evolving into a society. We translated language and put it in words that would lift the dead matter of 1975 up to another living level. . . here is a way for us to keep our identity in the old life and come into a new life.²³

Mohammed described the transition as a "metamorphosis,"²⁴ a natural process in the evolution of life from one stage to another, which allows the organism to maintain its identity but to grow and mature into a fuller existence. This is how he understands the NOI and its relationship to the subsequent incarnations.²⁵ The sentence, "We translated the language," speaks to the method by which they made the transition and maintained coherence between its origins and the new directions it was going. It is a reference, it seems, to the practice of reinterpreting the language and mythology of Fard and Muhammad and giving it a literal meaning that points prophetically to their new course.

²³ Muhammad. *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 113.

²⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 113.

²⁵ Because we are interested in the movement through 1978, we are mainly interested in the NOI-WCIW and only modestly concerned with the subsequent incarnations to the extent that they help us to interpret the trajectory of 1975-78.

For example, Mohammed saw in the Yakub mythology symbolic language of which he was able to make sense of the trajectory of the NOI.²⁶ He explains it by saying that couched in the language and symbolic teachings of Muhammad and Fard was data that pointed to Sunni Islam and their current path. In this way, Mohammed is able to connect the prophecy surrounding his birth to the prophetic reinterpretation of the theology and mythology of Fard and Muhammad and hence to demythologize it or what Martha Lee called “de-eschatologize” the teachings.²⁷ He is thankful that he is able to make sense out of the earlier teachings that have concrete application in the current program, for instance:

The social reform foundation, the economic program that I stand on is that of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and I just looked back and got the hint out of the dark symbolism of mathematical theology and I said, oh my—I don’t have to part company with these men. They wanted us to go in this direction. Thank God Almighty.²⁸

It is important personally and politically that Mohammed is able to indicate for his congregation that he is taking them in the direction that Fard and Muhammad wanted them to go and that they are the fulfillment of the esoteric teachings of the NOI leaders. Furthermore, Fard and the story of Yakub that he taught helped to explain African

²⁶ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 13-23, 208.

²⁷ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 101.

²⁸ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 210.

Americans' feeling of psychological inferiority, he thought.²⁹ To that end, in fact, he claims that many of Fard's teachings, including the catechism, introduced them to the Qur'an and made them desire it.³⁰ He is aware that the teachings did not line up absolutely with so-called "orthodoxy," but like Abdul Basit Naeem, a Pakistani Muslim and NOI supporter in the 1950s, he believed that the teachings were meant for their particular situation and that the NOI would grow in "Islamic" knowledge as time progressed.³¹

Finally, Mohammed is careful to point to the NOI and the WCIW as the same organization. He does not desire to compartmentalize or to see the movement as disjunctive. Rather, as stated above, he wants to see it as a coherent fulfillment of the prophetic symbolism of his predecessors, and whether he actually believes it or not, he

²⁹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 25-6.

³⁰ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 31-2.

³¹ See Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes's Problem*, Volume 1 (Atlanta, GA: M.E.M.P.S., n. d.), 3-5; Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom*, Volume 2 (Atlanta, GA: M.E.M.P.S., n. d.), 3. Abdul Basit Naeem was a Pakistani Muslim and supporter of the NOI, who was the Editor-Publisher of the *Moslem World & The U.S.A.* Naeem wrote the introduction to both volumes *The Supreme Wisdom*. He argued that the NOI was important for bringing Islam to America, and while he had some difficulties with some of their teachings, the story of Yakub in particular, he believed that they were Muslims and that as they continue to learn and encounter Muslims in the world that their teachings would move toward the mainstream.

wants to communicate this idea to his listeners. When asked about the history of the WCIW (February 28, 1979), he offers one history³²:

The organization began in the early 1930s, the historical date in our records is July 4, 1930. The organization was established under the name Lost Found Nation of Islam in America. The purpose of that organization was to separate blacks and whites. More importantly, the purpose was to regenerate the spiritual and the moral life of people who were living poor and ignorant lives.³³

Mohammed does not offer a separate history for the WCIW. Instead, he indicates what the purpose of the organization was and explicitly describes the movement as continuous.³⁴

³² It is also important to note that as late as November 1976 (*Bilalian News*, November 14, 1976, 1, 20-1), names “The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the West” and “Universal Nation of Islam” were still being used for the organization. See, Adilah Dawan. *The New Unabridged Edition/Source Index English & Arabic Historical Glossary Words Defined by Imam W. Deen Mohammed*, Volume 4, 2000-05 (Chicago: QHB Publishing & Design, 2006), 183.

³³ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 4.

³⁴ What this “continuity” means for black bodies is complicated, however. One the one hand Mohammed wants black bodies to be seen in concrete terms of Islam, which he understood as established, true, historical, and cultured. That is, Islam is a “fact,” for Mohammed. Furthermore, the manner in which he gained power vis-à-vis Louis Farrakhan suggests that he understood in very concrete and material terms that power is

Unfortunately, Mohammed's work in the Nation has received far less scholarly attention than the other figures represented as "critical historical moments" in this project.³⁵ Given the paucity of primary literature during this limited period, however, this chapter will utilize principal sources that Mohammed published in the 1980s,³⁶ many of

pursued and seized and that competition is eliminated, overpowered, or outwitted. On the other hand, couching his Islam in terms of contiguity with Fard and Muhammad means that certain meanings that were attached to their bodies, such as their esoteric, mystical, and enclavist orientations would still persist. This was strategic for Mohammed, who used such an orientation to justify his leadership and the direction that he was going, arguing for symbolic and allegorical interpretations of Fard and Mohammed. But this seems to present somewhat of a conflict in that he wants black bodies to be seen as concrete, historical, cultured, and religious but not as mystical or "spooky." Yet, it's precisely the "spooky" that he uses to his advantage as a strategic dissemblance or an outright manipulation of the language and symbols of the NOI in order to effectuate his own desire for the direction of the movement.

³⁵ See, Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 107, in which Curtis acknowledges the problem of the absence of scholarship and literature on Warith Deen Mohammed.

³⁶ See, Muhammad. *As the Light Shineth From the East*; W. Deen Mohammed. *Religion on the Line: Al-Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism* (Chicago: W.D. Muhammad Publishing Co., 1983); W. Deen Mohammed. *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Volume 1 (Chicago: W. D. Muhammad Publications, 1984); W. Deen. Muhammad. *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY: Challenges That Face*

which represent speeches, lectures, and homilies from the mid-to-late 1970s in which he offers his perspective on these transitional years. In addition, the chapter will employ sources that draw upon the NOI publication *Muhammad Speaks* (later *Bilalian News*), which recorded some of the doctrinal and political issues of the period.³⁷

Race and Islam: Mohammed's Nation and Islamic Black Bodies

(Doubly) Out-of-Place

The primary argument being made in this chapter is that race was the critical factor that shaped the lens through which Warith Deen Mohammed deployed Sunni Islam for his NOI constituents. This, it is argued here, is an enduring legacy that characterized his Islamic praxis through the various morphologies of his religious groups,³⁸ well after

Man Today, Volume 2 (Chicago: WDM Publishing Co., 1985); W. Deen Mohammed. *An African American Genesis* (Calumet City, IL: M.A.C.A. Publication Fund, 1986). Cf. Marsh, "Interview with Imam Wallace D. Muhammad, 153-71.

³⁷ For example, see Adilah Dawan. *The New Unabridged Edition/Source Index English & Arabic Historical Glossary Words Defined by Imam W. Deen Mohammed*, Volume 1, 1975-78 (Chicago: QHB Publishing & Design, 2005), which reproduces and defines the words and important concepts of Mohammed from *Muhammad Speaks* and *Bilalian News* during this time period. In addition, it includes an interview with Mohammed called "The Meaning of Ramadan" (74-92).

³⁸ From the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, to the American Muslim Mission (which eventually dropped the "American").

the NOI that he led ceased to exist as such. The result of this was the perception that these Islamic black bodies were perceived to be *out-of-place* in two ways, that is, vis-à-vis whiteness in America and among immigrant Muslims in America. Just as importantly, his understanding of what it meant to be Muslim necessitated that the social aspects of religion (i.e., political involvement, social service, uplift, etc.) be commensurate to the symbolic tenets (i.e., doctrine, purity of Islamic observances, etc.). Hence, the identity of black bodies in Islam is characterized by both symbolic and social facets of religion, although the symbolic were more important. This was an extremely important idea for Mohammed, who locates the teachings of the NOI in the 1930s to the socioeconomic conditions that African Americans faced and by extension the efforts of the WCIC:

I think the present community thinking in the World Community of al-Islam in the West is a result of the earlier teachings. We find many Islamic organizations but I don't believe there is one to be found like ours. I don't know of a single Islamic organization in America or outside that is really like ours. We put emphasis on the application of the religion in one's daily life and involvement in outer community. In the East, Muslims do apply their religion to their daily lives because that's what it's for. But few of them who live in America practice there religion that way.³⁹

Note that Mohammed makes a qualitative distinction between other Islamic organizations and the WCIC, giving priority to the latter because of its emphasis on practicing Islam in a manner that impacts the culture directly. He also indicates implicitly that perhaps

³⁹ Marsh, "Interview with Imam Wallace D. Muhammad," 157.

something about America morphs the religion of Islam so that it becomes less socially relevant than Islam in the East, which he seems to valorize as the standard.⁴⁰ This glorification of Islam in the “East” will become complicated and problematic, as this chapter will show, and Mohammed will come to dismiss this eastern orientation as race becomes the standard by which he interprets the religion, albeit contentiously.

The Body as a Social System

Further demonstrating his simultaneous and inseparable commitment to social practice and Islamic piety, Mohammad uses the body as a metaphor to demonstrate that religion is to be both material and ethereal (i.e., oriented toward ideas and religious discourses). *As the Light Shineth from the East* is by far his most significant work and indeed his *magnum opus*, due to its connection to his life in the NOI, the range of topics covered, the relation between the theology and themes of the early NOI and the WCIC, and the early

⁴⁰ This practice of romanticizing Muslims of the “East” particularly Arab Muslims is pervasive at times among African Muslims (and among others). Louis Brenner, ed. *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 7, points out that some Africans, in particular the Swahili, perceive themselves as “Arab” and maintain hegemony—a sense of superiority—over other African Muslims in Africa. As Mohammed’s thinking progresses, as we will see in this chapter, he rejects this deference to Arab and immigrant Muslims and advocate that African American Muslims interpret the Qur’an and the tradition for themselves.

date of some of its writings and vignettes (1970s). There he has this to say about the body⁴¹ as a social system that points to the divine importance of social action:

The balance is between the religious life and the material existence. The anatomy of society should be the anatomy of the human being. By that I mean in the anatomy of the human being you have bones structured well, you have muscles and you have skin covering the body; you have a head on top of the structure. You have a heart in the center, and that heart is pumping blood throughout the whole body. And you have organs for the discharging or releasing the waste in the body. And you have two legs supporting the structure, carrying it, and you have arms to deal with the work of the day. You have the vision before you and the ears divinely placed to catch the sound in the front, on the sides, behind and all around.⁴²

He continues by making the link between the body as a sort of divinely-created socio-religious institution and the epistemological nature of the body that holds the key to understanding religion as eminently social⁴³:

⁴¹ Mohammed frequently expounds on the idea of the body directly and indirectly. See, for instance, Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 37-9; 45-49; 53-9; 70-1; 94-106; 140-9, et al.

⁴² Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 38-9.

⁴³ Cf. Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 9. What this term means as I use it to describe Mohammed is that religion first and foremost emphasizes the collective.

God has built a great edifice in the human structure, and we should pay some attention to God's handiwork in those things that operate between the skies and earth. If we take heed of His hints in His creation, the hints that are in His designs, I'm sure we will get a sign to uplift humanity much greater than the world has seen yet.

For Mohammed, the physical body is a divine signifier of the importance of the relationship between the spiritual and the material, the heavenly and the earthly. He argues that embedded in the ways in which the body is structured is the knowledge and insight regarding how societies should function.

Through reflection on the body, suggests Mohammed, one should gain a greater sense of the urgency of the need for human uplift. Though he uses terms of the human body that are universal, it could be inferred from the fact that his audience is African American that he wants them to note, in particular, that their bodies are carriers of divine meaning. What is unclear in his analogy is his perspective of the disabled body and what is the meaning and function of it, and more significantly, what it signifies about God and society,⁴⁴ given that the body that he describes represents presumably the perfect theocratic society.⁴⁵ What is also conspicuously absent from Mohammed's metaphor is

⁴⁴ For interesting discussions of bodily disabilities and religion, see Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. eds. *This-Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

⁴⁵ Mary Douglas suggests the correspondence between bodily ideals and perfection and perfect theocracies, but Mohammed's statement seems to imply the same analogy. See,

reference to the sexual organs of the human body and what they may indicate for socio-religious praxis vis-à-vis gender and sexuality.

Mohammed carries further the metaphor of the body for religio-social and political concern when he speaks of the literal head of the physical body, again, signifying divine intentionality. In this case, the reference to the head pertains to the need of human beings to be governed. He retorts, “God in structuring our human bodies, has hinted to us the need to grow into government. He put a head on our body. And in the head, messages are received from all parts of the body.”⁴⁶ Two factors are noteworthy here. First, Mohammed continuously uses the term “hint” in various contexts.⁴⁷ This would seem to indicate that the knowledge of the meanings of the body are neither made explicit nor public and that such insight is of a special, most likely private and esoteric, nature. Second, his use of “head” as a metaphor for government, while it could indicate the intellect, vision, and so on, needed to govern, as such, probably indicates a hierarchical notion of leadership that would seem in conflict with his later steps to decentralize the NOI and with his explanation that follows. In short, the body is semiotic in that its members symbolize social realities such as we see in Mohammed’s metaphor.

Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 4, 154-6; See also, Mary Douglas. *Natural Symbols: Explorations of Cosmology* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003).

⁴⁶ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 56.

⁴⁷ E.g., Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 38-9.

To that end, Mohammad concludes that through the body, “God is telling us”⁴⁸ that leadership and government are “natural” but not a government that rules over people, since “We exist by having government in ourselves.”⁴⁹ Although he fails to offer adequate elucidation for what he means by this notion of internal government, it may be safe to infer that he points to a religiously taught or inculcated morality that one internalizes thus circumventing the need for formal social government. What he means to suggest when he says that government is natural also fails to receive elaboration. He could be making another reference to religious morality (i.e., governing/policing the body) that he essentializes by suggesting that it is “natural.”

In other words, he may be claiming that the problems of a society (that most likely result from immorality) are a result of behaviors that involve the body or center on the body that are unnatural (e.g., sexual immorality, illicit drug use, etc.). Regarding this contention, Mohammed says elsewhere in *As the Light Shineth from the East*, for instance:

If a member in our society begins to abuse their body we punish that member by bringing them before the congregation and showing the crazy thing to the congregation to shame him out of his crazy ways. We will put him in a restricted class. We deny him the full membership activity. Limit his voice and restrict his activities in the community.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 56.

⁴⁹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 56.

⁵⁰ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 73.

Sounding similar to the ritual discipline of the FOI, this notion that the community polices the body is in part a function of the body representing the social system (in this case a religious collectivity) and that preventing corruption of an individual's body is an attempt to maintain the "purity" of the group. In addition, it indicates that as a physical body has many members that belong to it, so too does a social system. Hence, individuals have no rights or absolute agency outside of the religious group. Mohammed illustrates this idea poignantly when he claims:

Your body doesn't belong to you. . . What gives you the right to think that you have a special right to do what you want with your body?. . . Because we know that if he treats himself [i.e., his body] like that, some ignorant grown-up or some little child may be influenced by his conduct; and pretty soon this independent germ who claims an independence that never belong to any individual will corrupt the whole society. You don't have any rights to do what you want with yourself.⁵¹

Thus, in the scheme of Mohammed's social order, bodily agency is limited, albeit enough human discretion exists to enable individuals to act in ways that threaten the sanctity of the group. This is why Mohammed advocates bodily control. He does not believe that individuals should have the right to pursue whatever bodily pleasures they choose. Left to their own hedonistic initiative, human beings may act in a manner that harms the collective:

⁵¹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 73.

You've just got to have a sensational charge. So-called civilized people, Bilalians too. A trio having sex. Two males and one female. Sometimes the whole pig sty of males and females having sex. Nothing is bad. We have been conditioned, programmed to believe that nothing should be denied a human being—if it's not harming people. Whatever he wants to do with his own life is his business.⁵²

The implication is that human agency should be monitored and regulated. Reminiscent of Elijah Muhammad, he uses "So-called" to call into question the claim of civility that is made by people who engage in hedonistic practices. The term "Bilalians too" indicates that African Americans are not the primary object of the judgment that he is making about society, but that they have been co-opted by these values as well. It is evident that Mohammed disagrees with assertions of human freedom that locate ultimate agency in the individual body. Accordingly, one's body belongs to the collective and is expected to function in service of the group.

In sum, Islam, in Mohammed's conception of the religion, is concerned with the symbolic and the social. To be sure, the symbolic and the social are intertwined and both express authentic religion, and he uses the body to illustrate this contention. The body signifies Allah's attention to social matters, including the ways in which society's are organized and governed. What does not appear in Mohammed's discourses at this point is attention to bodies that are not idealized or perfect, bodies that lie outside the authority of the religious group's policing, and bodies that are sexed and gendered in ways that

⁵² Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 81.

challenge the social order and fail to conform to the cosmology that informs it. What is apparent is that Mohammed wants to appreciate the body as religious—at least certain bodies as the purveyors of divine intent and order. In the end, such bodies are signifiers of divine activity.

Race, Islam, and the Body

Contrary to Mohammad's pronouncements about the universality of Islam and Islamic identity, he gives a great deal of attention to the subject of *race*—discussing its problems, addressing African American identity and culture, and speaking to the particularities of African American existence.⁵³ Race, it seems, is the most contentious subject, the most mired in conflict, and yet apparently the area that concerns him the most as he addresses black believers in Islam. His focus on African American conditions of existence seem to arise out of both his desire for Sunni Islam to be relevant to that existence and due to his upbringing in experience in the NOI that engendered in him a perspective that made black bodies central in his understanding of the world.

⁵³ See, all of his major works that reflect his leadership in the NOI and beyond. The instances in which he addresses race are far too expensive to document in this limited space. Compare, Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*; Mohammed, *Religion on the Line*; Mohammed, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Volume 1; Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Volume 2; Mohammed, *An African American Genesis*.

Yet, this perspective is often contradictory as he attempts to balance the two, since to embrace the one may be to deny the other. The notion that Islam is universal is problematic at best, given that it also becomes a totalizing metanarrative that governs and determines values and behavior for every aspect of human life. Mohammed maintains, for instance, that Islam “determines for the believer good manners, good thinking, everything. . .”⁵⁴ while, at the same time, expressing his desire to see everyone converted to Islam, claiming that the “desire of the true believer [is] to see everybody in his religion.”⁵⁵ How then does one mediate the particular if the universal is unmitigated?

Racism is a challenging notion with respect to Islam, and he is tactical in how he manages the racial issues that arise in his tradition. For instance, he attempts to circumvent issues of Arab violence toward Africans and the issue of slavery⁵⁶ by locating Muslim racism in undefined influences that entered Islam after the Prophet Muhammad:

There is no excuse for any racism or any color consciousness in the Muslim world. If any of our people have it, they got it from new kinds of racist

⁵⁴ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 1.

⁵⁵ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 28.

⁵⁶ For examples of discussions of Islam’s role in the enslavement of Africans, see Ronald Segal. *Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

influences that have been brought about since the mission and words of the Prophet Muhammad. They have no excuse for it.⁵⁷

This, of course, is a philosophical move that appears to be employed in an attempt to assuage Muslims and Islam of the responsibility for racism and to preserve the notion of universality.⁵⁸ Mohammed, either naively, grossly inaccurately, or both, claims that

⁵⁷ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 170. Segal, however, ties the institution of slavery, indeed black slavery, to the very inception of Islam in the seventh century, an institution that, according to him, endures presently. Cf. Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, ix, 199-223.

⁵⁸ Likewise, Sylviane A. Diouf's *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998) gives little attention to the Muslim role in the slave trade but instead focuses on the European Christian transatlantic trade and valorizes African Muslim attempts to maintain their religion in America and in slavery. He says, for example, "Islam was also the first revealed religion freely followed—as opposed to imposed Christianity by the Africans who were transported to the New World" (p. 1). But such a statement reveals a bias toward valorizing Islam, which at the same time obfuscates Arab and African Muslim slavery (of African Muslims [See, Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, 36-7]) and compulsory religion via jihads and reformers (*mujadid*) and overemphasizing the role of Christianity, when both Islam and Christianity (and to a lesser extent Judaism) were culpable and at times brutal and inhumane. John Hunwick suggests that this tendency to give greater attention to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and very little to Muslim slavery and the forced

racism does not exist in Islam when he contends, “You cannot be a racist and call yourself a Muslim.”⁵⁹ Nearly four decade earlier, his father made the same factual error, stating that “The Arabs are said to have slaves. The Arabs will answer for themselves, but I do know that no Muslim will enslave another Muslim.”⁶⁰ Mohammed, however, suggested that the hajj reveals Islam as all-inclusive.⁶¹ To its logical extent, Mohammed’s notion of the universality of Islam, his belief and desire for everyone to be Muslim (in particular African Americans), and the acquiescence to the totalizing Islamic proscriptions for human life, collapse into monism as all life and existence is reduced to oneness, “The Holy Quran tells us that life is one, not two. The human life is one. Not only the human life but life, period, is one according to the teaching of al-Islam. Your life is a part of life in the whole creation.”⁶²

Furthermore, Mohammed strategically circumvents the problematic and perennial issue of Arab Muslim enslavement of Africans that may challenge the notion of the

migration of Africans to the lands of the Mediterranean is a pervasive practice. See, John Hunwick and Eve Trout Powell. *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2002), ix, esp. 51-64.

⁵⁹ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 4.

⁶⁰ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 1, 29.

⁶¹ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 4.

⁶² Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 171. Cf. Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 8, esp. 18, where he references Qur’anic Suras 4.1, 49.13, and 10.19 to support his claim.

universality of Islam through appeal to reason, which he advocates often, by suggesting that one does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is to say, not only does he minimize Islam's role in slavery, he suggests that the benefits far outweigh the minor and aberrant part that Muslims may have played. He argues:

Do you think an intelligent man—even if he knew for certain that some Arabs were in the slave trade business—would separate himself from the great past, from his great history and dignity in al-Islam simply because some Arabs had a part in the slave trade? No intelligent man would do that kind of foolish thing.⁶³

He continues by excusing the behavior of some and in a contradictory manner, claims that it does not change the nature of the religion, for him:

So, if history shows me that an Arab or some Arabs or hundreds of thousands of Arabs were involved in the slave traffic, that would not change my faith. That would not make me walk any slower toward my Arab brother who is a Muslim. I will keep my same love and appreciation for my Muslim Arab brother. I will keep my same devotion to Allah. I will keep my eyes and my whole self turned toward the ka'abah at Mecca. I don't care what the Arabs did or what they do.⁶⁴

His conclusion and his insistence that what Arab Muslims did or do with respect to Africans is curious, given that he is constantly critical of whites and their practice of

⁶³ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 136.

⁶⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 137-8.

slavery.⁶⁵ Accordingly, he implicitly blames white Christians for the criticism of Islam's role in the slave trade while simultaneously defending Arab Muslims, suggesting:

No Arab could ever do those things and come out with the Holy Quran in his arms. Question those who told you that the Arabs did those things. Question their history and see the evil things that they did with the Bible in their arms. There are pictures right now of them standing having parties, smoking, drinking, laughing and celebrating at the sight of a poor Bilalian [i.e., an African American] being burned up at the stake or lynched on the tree. And there are pictures right now of some preachers in their midst holding a Bible under his [*sic*] arm. I'm not trying to say that Christian is bad, but I'm saying you shouldn't throw stones if you live in glass houses.⁶⁶

Mohammed, as in his statement above, is much more explicit in his attack on racism and the particularities of African American experience. That Muslims could not do violence to Africans and African Americans and “come out with the Holy Qur'an in his arms” is blatantly false and contrary to historical evidence. Here, in an attempt to maintain the integrity of Islam, he lashes out at white Christians, whom he perceives are the ones making the claim that Islam is associated with enslaving black people. He accuses them of hypocrisy—of challenging the universality of Islam by invoking the trope of slavery—while failing to come to grips with its own brutal treatment of African

⁶⁵ For example, Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 13-15; 104-5.

⁶⁶ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 138.

Americans such as lynching. His language is intentionally inflammatory, given that he wants to indict white Christianity for its ideological and practical conflicts, and he amplifies this contention by appealing to traditional conservative moral taboos, by suggesting that these same Christians who would charge Islam with racism say nothing about the Christians who were violent racists, but in addition, they have parties, smoke, and drink alcohol.

Mohammad takes the tension between the universal (symbolic) and the particular (social) a step further, when he suggests that for African Americans, if they are to push against and beyond the barriers that have kept them oppressed, have to have an ideology and method that is universal—in effect, suggesting that the symbolic and the social must come together if they are to overcome some of the lingering effects of racism and slavery.⁶⁷ He insists, “If you are going to establish yourself as a Race, as an ethnic group, that can best be done upon the Universal Plan.”⁶⁸ Presumably this universal plan is Islam, the “universal groove,”⁶⁹ to which he maintains black people must be connected.⁷⁰

Mohammed makes his claim for the primacy of Islam for African Americans explicit in *An African American Genesis*, where he argues that Islam is the remedy for the problems of African Americans and that a sincere religious morality can ennoble them

⁶⁷ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 95.

⁶⁸ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 96.

⁶⁹ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 98-9.

⁷⁰ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 97.

and re-connect them to their historic Islamic roots. He argues that in Islam African Americans can establish a meaningful group identity⁷¹ and that black people can be revitalized and made anew if African American ways of being in the world are “infuse[d]” with an Islamic ethos.⁷² His concern for race, racism, and Islam reflects his desire to valorize black bodies and to distance them from their historic association with race and racism, all of which are negative to Mohammed. His desire to disrupt black bodies symbolically from continuing to carry such negative meanings or to reproduce the affects of racism can be clearly seen in how far he is willing to go to advocate for Islam, which for him is the apex of culture and dignity.

Subsequently, he makes one of his more controversial remarks when he declares that African Americans would be better off by abandoning Christianity and embracing Islam, for it would offer them a sense of self-respect that Christianity cannot: “It would be better if our people left the church and came into the mosque. It would give them a level of dignity in this country that they never enjoyed before.”⁷³ His claim seems a little contradictory, since he argues that one of the benefits that Islam offers is that it does not allow anthropomorphisms, which in context, implies that it offers no space for the perpetuation of a privileged status for some and subjugation on others based on imaging the divine in their own form,⁷⁴ such as “white images of heaven, God, angels. . . Jesus.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, ix.

⁷² Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 68.

⁷³ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 44.

⁷⁴ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 44.

What he could be attempting to say is that Islam's denial of imaging the divine in human form and its universality would allow African Americans more opportunity to find equality, due to its lack of racial hierarchy. Again, he ignores strains of Arab supremacy and nationalism and many other issues when he preferentially invites black people to trade one set of problems for another.

Moreover, it is in this text where he elucidates my contention that he ultimately privileges particularity over universality and that race shapes the hermeneutic through which he deploys Islam when he, contrary to his rhetoric suggesting a color-blind religion, engages in some of the most stirring race-talk. Mohammed claims that because Islam is a religion of peace it offers "no radical teachings on race,"⁷⁶ but then, he proceeds to connect radical claims of race consciousness and black self-respect regarding the black body to the teachings of Islam and the Qur'an, for instance, he maintains: "When I hear or read that God has created my form beautiful, there is nothing anyone can tell me to discourage me, to make me feel inferior and make me think that nappy hair, a wide nose, black skin or thick lips are ugly."⁷⁷ Yet, his language reproduces the negative connotations of Negroid phenotype when he describes his hair as "nappy," his nose as "wide," and his lips as "thick," since such terms are negative terms for black body parts.

He explicitly, if not directly, acknowledges the precarious condition of African Americans that requires attention to the specific experiences they have had in America

⁷⁵ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 42.

⁷⁶ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 16.

⁷⁷ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 17.

when he proposes that “our [black] behavior is the result of or the effects of the peculiar experience behind us.”⁷⁸ It is this “peculiar” experience vis-à-vis racism that moves him to read or to re-read Sunni Islam for African American people, despite his insistence throughout his corpus that Islam is basically the Five Pillars, the oneness of humanity, which comes from the “pure concepts”⁷⁹ in the Qur’an, the divine law or “Shar’ee,”⁸⁰ and clean moral living.⁸¹ Curiously, Mohammed finds something divinely providential and special about the deleterious experiences of African Americans in the United States that sounds suspiciously like the valorization of suffering, when he notes: “I believe with all of my heart, and with every fiber of my being that God has blessed us as a people by putting us into this situation.”⁸² At the same time, he pushes against “this situation” in a move that is reminiscent of Martin Luther King’s “temporary segregation,”⁸³ Elijah Muhammad’s “go for self,” and the Black Nationalism that Mohammed so often criticizes,⁸⁴ when he advocates a “strategic withdrawal” from “the whiteman.”⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 41.

⁷⁹ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 7.

⁸⁰ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 11.

⁸¹ For instance, Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 7-11.

⁸² Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 35.

⁸³ Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998), 325.

⁸⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 141-2.

⁸⁵ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 34-5.

According to Mohammed, African Americans have endured such pervasive white supremacy exemplified in slavery, that it has had pernicious affects on the black psyche and on the destruction of black culture, history, and religion (i.e., Islam) that necessitate the drastic solution of physical separation from whites, stating “We need to set up camp in a desirable climate for six months, or a year, even longer if necessary. We need to stay together until we come out with what we need.”⁸⁶ What is needed remains largely unarticulated, but he does suggest that African Americans need their own ideology and group identity. Oddly enough, he locates this tradition in the thought of W. E. B. DuBois, Benjamin Mays, Franz Fanon, and Carter G. Woodson, asserting that “they all headed in this direction.”⁸⁷ It is interesting that rather than appealing to Islam alone as the ultimate source in service of remediating the black condition, he cites black critical, social, and race theories in his justification for the radical race-inspired and therapeutic separation. Another conflict with his claim of universality seems inherent in the declaration that African Americans need a distinct group identity and an ideology.

At this juncture (we will return to this idea later), one should also note that white supremacy and slavery has upset the natural order of things that God has established in black families, particularly the role of women (see Chapter Seven), he contends.⁸⁸ Consistent with this claim, he declares that the subjugated status of women, indeed the

⁸⁶ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 35.

⁸⁷ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 34-5.

⁸⁸ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 31-3.

gendered social order, is ontological, established by God, and supported by the Qur'an.⁸⁹ In a sense, while he blames racism for the pathology in black communities, black women have been unwittingly and passively complicit. He retorts, "This world has frightened the woman out of her domain. In her home domain is the fortress for protection of the life of society. And it has been the deterioration of home life that has resulted in bringing down the race."⁹⁰ Only God can give black men the power to correct the problems that racism has caused in the black family, he maintains.⁹¹

Mohammed seems aware of the negative trappings of the notion of "race," though he obviously does not always avoid them. Simultaneously, he is ever conscious of the ways in which black bodies, the standard of which is constructed as male, carry negative meaning in the culture due to racialization,⁹² and he focuses on African American identity and culture as a strategy to evade the social and psychological ramifications that are endemic to race-based nomenclatures such as "black" and "African-American."⁹³

⁸⁹ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 33.

⁹⁰ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 33.

⁹¹ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 32.

⁹² E.g., Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks in Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 79.

⁹³ Although he often reports having some affection for the term "African-American," which he says is the "second choice," partly because it is the nomenclature that Marcus Garvey initiated. See, Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 79.

Hollywood and the media, he argues, have had negative effects on the black self-image and the representation of black bodies. He explains:

Ten years ago in the 1960s, look what we were doing. What motivated us? Was it rational doctrine, or was it emotionalism? Someone raised the black fist and said 'Black Power'—and revolutionized the whole African American community. Someone sang the song, 'Black and Proud,' and changed the mind of the whole African American community. Then, Hollywood and TV comes out and shows us some dressed-up peacock sissy pimps in long chinchilla coats; Sherwood forest tights with mink spots on their alligator shoes—and we turn into a bunch of pampered sissies. The welfare class; That's what we've become.⁹⁴

Mohammed claims that prior to Hollywood's and the media's influence African Americans had more substantive internal activities and self-consciousness. He points to slogans that signify political and cultural aspects of black life in support of his charges—perhaps Stokely Carmichael's (Kwame Ture's) shout of and demand for "black power" and James Brown's melodic but political song "Black and Proud." The connection between the depreciation in black culture and television and movies, however, is unsubstantiated, but Mohammed frames the derogation of black life in male terms, citing the "pimp"—exaggerated, colorful, opulent, and feminine—as proof that whites view black identity as a caricature and that the meaning of blackness in America is undeniably destructive.

⁹⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 79.

Mohammed seeks to redeem black bodies from such vulnerability to decrepit depictions and miserable meanings. He desires to dissociate black bodies from inferiority and lack of culture and history that such terms indicate, as did his father. To that end, the term “black,” he maintains, has no history, but rather is only a geographical identity.⁹⁵ Instead, he proposes that African Americans call themselves “Bilalians,” (The name appears in *Muhammad Speaks*, October 24, 1975, p. 2)⁹⁶ after the seventh-century African slave and Muslim convert, Bilal ibn Rabah,⁹⁷ who was the first prayer caller (*mu'adhdhin*) in Islam. This is not a creative and original idea that Mohammed advances. As early as November 1966, his father, showed a film on Bilal to members of the NOI,

⁹⁵ Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks in Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 79. It's unclear if he is suggesting the existence of a “Blackland” or something similar. It is uncertain what the corresponding geography is.

⁹⁶ See, Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 89; Cf. Dawan. *The New Unabridged Edition/Source Index*, 7, who locates the usage in *Bilalian News*, November 7, 1975 edition.

⁹⁷ Muhammad Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh: A Leading Companion of the Prophet Muhammad* (n.p.: American Trust Publications, 1977); H. A. R. Craig. *Bilal* (London: Quartet Books, 1977). See also, Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America*, 270-1; McCloud, *African American Islam*, 75-6. Richard Brent Turner. *Islam in the African American Experience* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 225. See, discussion of Bilali Mohammed and Salih Bilali, slaves on the Georgia islands in the early nineteenth century. Allan D. Austin. *African Muslims in Antebellum America* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 85-113.

and suggested that Bilal was the first black man to embrace Islam, contradicting his own notion that African Americans were Muslim ontologically.⁹⁸ Mohammed follows him in his valorization of Bilal:

I think it's [*sic*] more dignity in identifying with an ancestor than in identifying with skin color. When I say I am a Bilalian, I'm saying that I am a man like Bilal. When I say I am black, I'm saying I am a man like black skinned people and black skinned are not only in the Bilalian ethnic family; they are also in the Indian ethnic family. So, I should ask you if you're black, which black?⁹⁹

Therefore, Mohammed's goal is to associate African Americans with a "racial" nomenclature and symbol that indicates culture, history, and dignity and to jettison the negative associations with racialized terminology and the notion of race generally. But it is also clear that for him "black," while problematic, holds some diversity of meaning—"which black?"—that Bilal does not hold. It is a term that for him is all-encompassing for persons heretofore referred to as black. Mohammed makes some mistakes here, however.

The first mistake is that he assumes that all notions of race are in conflict with concepts of culture, and he seems unaware of perspectives such as the one Lucius Outlaw offers in *On Race and Philosophy*,¹⁰⁰ following W. E. B. DuBois' *Conservation of the*

⁹⁸ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 66.

⁹⁹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Lucius T. Outlaw. *On Race and Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 151-7.

Races,¹⁰¹ who suggests that it is possible to understand race not in terms of a biological ontology (though such collectives end up having many shared physical characteristics due to grouping) but rather in terms of social construction, shared culture and meanings, and as a historical unit of identification (rather than an essentialist classification) that creates spaces for values and positive valorization in the face of oppression and exclusion.¹⁰² As such, Outlaw pushes against projects of modernity that seek to exorcise “race” from the language as illusory and (as he argues Du Bois advocates), he seeks to maintain the idea of race as potentially positive and meaningful when he suggests:

Whether or not an individual can enjoy a relatively unrestricted and flourishing life is tied to the well-being of the group; the well-being of the group requires concerted action predicated on self-valorization within the context of a shared identity without succumbing to chauvinism. Further, the racial and/or ethnic life-world provides the resources and nurturing required for the development, even, of individual talent and accomplishment such that the distinctive contributions can be made to human civilization. Thus must the race of African peoples—all races—be ‘conserved.’¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Cf. W. E. B. Du Bois. “The Conservation of the Races.” *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*, No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1897). See also, <http://www.webdubois.org/dbConsrVOfRaces.html/>. Accessed June 4, 2008. See, Introduction of this project for my discussion of Outlaw and Du Bois.

¹⁰² Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy*, 151.

¹⁰³ Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy*, 157.

For Outlaw, then, the notion is of political, historical, and psychosocial value.

Furthermore, it is important to “conserve” because, despite arguments that race is a *fiction*, he wants to understand it as *real* in terms of social ontology¹⁰⁴—that it produces real and concrete affects that are important to recognize for any number of significant reasons.¹⁰⁵

Mohammed seems to embrace some aspects of this notion implied, despite his objection to race, in his constant attention to pernicious African American experiences and the effects of racism, particularly enslavement, and his desire to connect African Americans as a *group* to a history that is valorizing. This can be seen in his desire to bind black people to Bilal ibn Rabah and in his instituting “Ethnic Survival Week” in 1978 as a replacement to Saviour’s Day, in which the NOI historically celebrated the “birthday” of God, Master Fard Muhammad. The inaugural addresses (plus an address delivered to the American Academy of Religion)¹⁰⁶ are published as his *magnum opus*, *As the Light*

¹⁰⁴ Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ See also, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55, 59, 63-5, 128.

Glaude also sees the value in conserving the notion of race and social ontology (although he does not use the term), given that he is interested in addressing the effects of race as part of his theoretical and pragmatist project to realize American democracy.

¹⁰⁶ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 9-36. The AAR address was entitled “The Evolution of the Nation of Islam.”

Shineth from the East,¹⁰⁷ and he dedicates them to “great Bilalian (African American) leaders,”¹⁰⁸ including Omar ibn Said, Nat Turner, Samuel E. Cornish, Benjamin Banneker, Clara Muhammad, Frederick Douglass, Noble Drew Ali, John Brown,¹⁰⁹ Dr. Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad, Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, Marcus Garvey, and many others—a litany of “race” heroes.¹¹⁰

The second error that Mohammed makes in his attempt to abandon race (while glorifying African American culture and history) in order to re-imagine black bodies, is that in superciliously imposing Bilal as the paradigmatic figure who represents all African Americans, all black people,¹¹¹ he reifies black history, culture, religious orientation, gender, time period, and diversity. That is to say, he compresses complexity into sameness and anachronism. In addition, he theologizes all of these factors, until in the end, “Bilal,” as a symbol, becomes transcendental and mystical in its scope to signify all realities of all black people. Notwithstanding, he is evidently aware of some of the

¹⁰⁷ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 232. John Brown is included as “Bilalian” despite the fact that he was not African American. It is unclear whether or not this is an error.

¹¹⁰ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 223-42.

¹¹¹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 18; Mamiya, “From Black Muslim to Bilalian,” 139.

objections to the use of Bilal as the quintessential symbol of blackness as he promulgates his defense of the viewpoint:

As I said earlier, some of you don't like the term Bilalian—it's okay with me. If you like the term—'Afro-American' then we can still talk. But you know, even the term Afro-American was a compromise. Afro-American—why cut the word short? Because niggers weren't ready to say 'African.' They were afraid to identity with Africa. Marcus Garvey said, Afro-American; that's like cutting the word short. That's like an Irish-American calling himself, 'Ir-American.' The Irish-American is not afraid to use the whole name—'Irish-American.' And I'm telling you, until we get that same kind of respect, get rid of that old fear in us—an unnecessary fear, an uncalled for fear in 1978. We have to get the courage and appreciation for reality, for truth to say, 'African-American,' because that's what we are. Now I don't like the term 'African' because the Caucasians gave the continent that name. I like the term 'Bilalian.' What's wrong with the term 'Bilalian?'¹¹²

To a certain extent, Lawrence Mamiya's observation is correct when he argues that the use of Bilal as a symbol of black people is related to the history of African American identification with Ethiopia,¹¹³ albeit, the issue is much more complex. In addition to an Ethiopianism that was extant especially in 19th-century black religious and nationalist

¹¹² Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 97. The section of the book in which this citation appears is called "Niggers, Blacks, Afro Americans, etc."

¹¹³ Mamiya, "From Black Muslim to Bilalian," 139.

thought, Bilal's appeal is the fact that he was a significant Muslim, who happened to be Ethiopian. In relation to these two facts, Bilal embodies other issues of importance for the NOI.

Four other factors related to Bilal's import for the NOI as a Muslim, it seems, drive the identification most strongly, given that he was an African. The first is Bilal's uniqueness as the first prayer caller, or muezzin (*mu'adhdhin*), who offered the litany (*adhan*) that signaled to Muslims that it was time to pray.¹¹⁴ The second, and perhaps most powerfully for Mohammed, was Bilal's identity as a slave who when free asserted his right to remain free to serve God. According to the narrative,¹¹⁵ the conversation between Bilal and Abu Bakr, who purchased his freedom, proceeds this way:

¹¹⁴ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 63-8.

¹¹⁵ I have used the term "narrative" here because it is not clear from my reading of the texts on Bilal that they are historical. The texts, indeed, read as if they were constructed as a legendary account to support certain doctrinal and theological positions in Islam (e.g., slavery, succession after the Prophet Muhammad, racial inclusion, etc.), that is, the text is apologetic. Mohammed mistakenly reads the narrative of Bilal as historical fact. Published in 1977, it is also clear that Abdul-Rauf's account may have been the primary source for Mohammed and his movement. The preface appears to substantiate this claim: "This book has been written in response to a request made by one of my dear brothers, Karim 'Abdul 'Aziz, a leading figure in the energetic movement of the Nation of Islam in North America. After a little reflection, I realized the tremendous value of such a book to us, the members of the Muslim community in America. This is not only because Bilal

Abu Bakr! *If you have purchased me to be your slave, keep me in your possession; but if you have paid my price for the sake of God, let me be free to serve God.* I have been looking for this moment to see you restored fully to your liberty, Abu Bakr responded. You are as free as you can be.¹¹⁶

Mohammed seems to have been familiar with this narrative because he alludes to the story above when he, again, argues for why Bilal should be the paragon of black identification:

Study the history of Bilal, and if you don't see a prophetic figure resembling us—the whole people—a figure speaking to our problems and to our beautiful destiny, that *we are not free to be possessed again by those who freed us. We are free to go independently for ourselves as other people are free to do.* . . .¹¹⁷

Mohammed perhaps sees this account as particularly poignant in its relation to African Americans, but the reference in context points to Bilal's desire to practice the nascent rituals of Islam rather than return to the brutality and limited existence of slavery, and this might be especially meaningful for African Americans who are Muslim. Note the similarities in the italicized texts above, and it is difficult to imagine that Mohammed is

shared his African roots with a large segment of our community, but his life and noble virtues can be a tremendous source of inspiration to Muslims all over the world.” Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, iii.

¹¹⁶ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 25. Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁷ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 101. Emphasis is mine.

not making an allusion to Bilal's statement to Abu Bakr about remaining free to serve God rather than being possessed by emancipators.

The third factor in play that may be influencing identification with him is the extended remonstrance that Bilal "apparently" makes concerning Islam and slavery.¹¹⁸ He reportedly argues that Islam has actually helped "the slave,"¹¹⁹ and that sudden emancipation would hurt the slave and the master, in that the institution of slavery in Islam protected human rights for the enslaved and implies that such dissolution of the institution would injure Muslim masters, given the [obvious] loss of benefits that he leaves unarticulated.¹²⁰ Abdul-Rauf also uses Bilal's dialogue on slavery as a means to demonstrate that Islam is better for the slave than Christianity or Judaism. Bilal allegedly reports:

'To help the slave, Islam has done what no other system and no other religion did or could do,' Bilal answered. 'The Torah enjoined slavery, and Christianity was silent about it. But Islam has left no chance except that it urged the emancipation of slaves, (as a mandatory obligation or as a recommended action). It promises great rewards for emancipating a slave; and makes this emancipation one of the foremost duties incumbent upon a believer as a manifestation of his gratitude for the blessings of God.'¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 58-61.

¹¹⁹ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 58.

¹²⁰ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 57-61.

¹²¹ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 58-9.

This doctrinal statement regarding slavery is an important excursus which may lend to the appeal of Bilal to people of African descent whose ancestors were slaves (especially for those who are Muslim). Moreover, Bilal goes on to imply that embedded in the foundation of Islam is the potential that the slaves, who are apparently due a portion of the obligatory alms (*zakat*) can and are empowered eventually to purchase their own freedom with funds they have saved.¹²²

The fourth and final factor influencing the selection of Bilal as “black” exemplar supreme is the potential to locate black people centrally in the drama of prophetic succession in Islam. In other words, the issue of who was to succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of Muslims (*Khalifa/Amir al-Mu'minina*) plays out ostensibly in the life of Bilal as the central character. This is particularly decisive for Muslims such as Mohammed who identify themselves as Sunni, given that they trace authentic succession through Abu Bakr, rather than the Shi'a for whom Ali, the prophet's younger cousin is seen as the rightful heir to the progression of leadership. As the story goes, it is said that when the Prophet Muhammad was so gravely ill that he could not respond to Bilal's invitation to lead the congregation in prayer as he normally did, the Prophet appointed Abu Bakr to lead the prayers.¹²³ When Abu Bakr could not be located, Bilal requested that Umar stand in, that is, until Abu Bakr was located. Hence, after the Prophet died (632 CE/11 AH), succession of the caliphate was interpreted as proceeding

¹²² Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 59.

¹²³ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 67.

to Abu Bakr, rather than Ali, then to Umar. Mohammed at least seems tenuously aware of the relationship between Bilal and Abu Bakr as Caliph, when he reminds us that

Bilal was an Ethiopian and he was made a slave by Arab people. And it was Arab people who freed him. Isn't that a beautiful parallel? . . . It was a heathen, idolatrous slave-master that held Bilal. Abu-Bakr, who became the first ruler after the 'Great Prophet,' paid the slave master 'ransom money' for Bilal.¹²⁴

Mohammed observes, intentionally, that the man who paid the price for Bilal's freedom to worship God became the Caliph of the religious community. He uses the narrow instance of Abu Bakr paying the "ransom money" for Bilal as a metonym to indicate the scenario above, in which the relationship between them was used to indicate leadership succession. The authority for this movement seems to reside in the fact that Bilal, who prior to the Muhammad's death would not say the *adhan* for anyone but the Prophet, offered it for Abu Bakr and later for Umar.¹²⁵

Therefore, the issue of why the NOI and Mohammed chose Bilal to represent black people is a complex one, but it seems unmistakable that religious commitment, rather than a concern for Bilal's universally "black" ideal was the impetus for selecting him as the archetype for black bodies.¹²⁶ For Mohammed, Bilal gave African Americans

¹²⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 100.

¹²⁵ Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh*, 68-70.

¹²⁶ By 1985, however, the term "Bilalian" is rarely seen in Mohammed's writing and by 1986, it is absent. See, Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, vol. 2 (1985) and Muhammad, *African American Genesis* (1986).

a historical and cultural genealogy that made black bodies beautiful in terms of their meaning, and his, like Elijah Muhammad's, was an attempt to distance and deflect the negative meanings that black bodies carried as a result of slavery, lynching, and racist discourses. As we have seen, he errs in his reaction to race, treating the notion as if it is mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed to culture which he seeks to re-institute in black life.

Culture, as such, was the key to black bodies being seen as civilized, refined, and human, and Mohammed is explicit in his aspiration to bring sophistication back to African Americans. He reflects nostalgically, "'A people without a culture are bare as a tree' . . . The Bilalians used to really repeat this quote from the Bible, especially when they were thinking about their problem of trying to get equality and opportunity in America."¹²⁷ African Americans had lost this consciousness of culture that once characterized them, however. And the NOI specifically had fallen from the civility and style that he thought once characterized it. Using the caricature of the NOI "super-fly" ministers who were wearing "diamond rings," and "chinchilla coats," he states bluntly that they were "wearing pimp's clothes and preaching nation building."¹²⁸ The pimp aesthetic to which he refers elsewhere in his writing and speeches is symptomatic evidence of the loss of cultural ethos about which he is melancholy. Again, embodied in Bilal, he sees the cultural redemption of a people whose culture and history has been

¹²⁷ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 110.

¹²⁸ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 102.

marred with pain: “We share one painful history [with Bilal],¹²⁹ and one glorious rise from that history. . . and yet stand up as human beings to tell the inhuman racist his shame.”¹³⁰ “Black” he maintains does not imply culture and civilization, only “Bilalian” captures it.¹³¹

Mohammed’s goal for black people in this manner remains consistent with the goals of Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad—to raise the status of black people as they are seen by the world, to shape their image, to have more control over the behavior of those who would be detrimental to their respectability, and to engender respectability and cultural values in black communities:

We can’t rise up in the eyes of the world as a civilized Community, and productive people while carrying chinchilla coats, Super-Fly pimps, sissies, dope peddlers, wine drunkards and vulgar talkers who are just satisfied to stand on the corner and talk nasty for 16 hours, go home and sleep eight hours, get up and get right back on the job and talk nasty for another 16 hours. . . How are we going to rise? We can’t rise until we strip off this kind of self-inflicting ignorance and filth that we have on us that’s maming [*sic*] us physically, morally and spiritually. We first have to dump this stuff to move on. We have to back. We can’t solve 1975. Go back to the teaching of Dr. Fard Muhammad that tells us that civilization means culture, refinement, happiness, peace, and love, and

¹²⁹ Emphasis is mine.

¹³⁰ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 102.

¹³¹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 128.

that the duty of the civilized person is to teach that to the uncivilized. We have to go back to that. We have to reform ourselves in the intelligent dignified image.¹³²

Mohammed not only sounds like Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard, he locates the solution to the black plight in their ethos and program. Consistent with his father, his tone is moralistic, and his interdictions are puritanical, espousing the same conservative values and lifestyle that was the hallmark of the NOI for nearly fifty years. He calls for the reform of the African Americans who are in the “mud” (though he does not use the term here)—those who are poor and whose morals and behavior reflects those who have internalized the values of the dominant culture and have bought into stereotypes and images of black bodies as buffoons and street hustlers. Going back means embracing the core values of the movement and immersing themselves in the ethos and aesthetic that gave them a sense of somebodiness, pride, and respectability. In short, he tells his audience, “We must have culture, dear people.”¹³³

His longing for the culture of the NOI’s past will not let him mourn and move forward, for he is certain that in the teachings and practices of the NOI was an essential truth about beautifying black bodies—that it rested in the elegance and aesthetics that Master Fard Muhammad brought to black people. Mohammed speaks of Fard:

Now we can get the full value of the great thing that happened to us in 1930, July 4. Doctor Fard Muhammad (‘Wali’), he didn’t just teach us to separate

¹³² Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 121-2.

¹³³ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 123.

ourselves and to take on the responsibility for improving our lives by ourselves, he also taught us the meaning of civilization.¹³⁴

Mohammed expresses affection for what he considers the most important gift that Fard gave to African Americans, namely, the art of civilization. In his words, Fard gave them “righteousness,” “refinement,” and “culture.”¹³⁵ Note that he wants to deflect attention away from Fard’s notion of racial separation and emphasize that the NOI founder taught corporate responsibility and civility. In respect for what Fard has given the Nation, Mohammed calls him “*Wali*,” the honorific title for a holy man or saint in the religion of Islam, the “master,” who gave them independence and authenticity.

“And I Am Not White Either”¹³⁶: Mohammed and the “Foreigner” as a Negative Trope for Purity and Authenticity

This section will explore Mohammed’s concern for “foreigners” and argue that he uses the term and its variations as a negative trope for purity and authenticity. That is, over against things and people who are not African American and “black,” independent of external control or overdetermining influences, Mohammed marks himself as an (sometimes “*the*”) authoritative, undefiled, and *bona fide* leader of African Americans and Muslims, who embodies the best values and morality that are needed in order to reform black communities. Operating in the background of this consciousness regarding

¹³⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 109.

¹³⁵ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 109.

¹³⁶ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 29.

things foreign is a puritanical morality that grounds his sense of authenticity in an idealized notion of the black body that is pure and uncontaminated by worldly and depraved behavior, and that his body corresponds analogically to his desire for an African American community whose culture and lifestyle is self-regulating, autonomous, and beautiful. This awareness of foreigners functions discursively vis-à-vis whites and immigrant Muslims to create a space in which black people can construct their own reality and religion.

First, Mohammed is critical of the political, economic, and psychological influences that white people have on African Americans—an influence that even led to the founding of the NOI because according to him, Master Fard Muhammad is a white man and a foreigner: “I don’t know how many of you had it, but I know I had it and many of my friends had it—the picture of Dr. Fard himself. That man didn’t look like an original black man in terms of pigmentation. He looked like a Georgia Caucasian white.”¹³⁷ Had Fard not been a white man, he contends, black people would not have listened to him and considered him authoritative. He explains:

It was easy for him to be a substitute or take the place of Christ in our minds and hearts because he was, himself, resembling Caucasian people. I don’t believe he would have been a success if he had big thick lips, a flat nose, kinky hair and black skin. I don’t believe that we would have listened to him. The self-image

¹³⁷ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineneth from the East*, 206-7.

was so hated and so rejected by us because of the brainwashing and the lies that we were given by the Caucasian in America of our origin as a people.¹³⁸

Mohammed points out the deeply seeded difficulty that African Americans had with their self-image of their own bodies vis-à-vis whiteness, and ironically he makes his points using pejorative terms to describe black features. He believes that black self-hatred was so ingrained in African Americans due to racism that they would have rejected a black messiah figure. It was only because Fard was white, or looked white, he thinks, that black people embraced him as a religious leader and as God. Consequently, he wants to break this reliance on whites, as a symbolic presence in the mentalities of African American and excise them from the sociopolitical and religious hold that they have on black communities. He laments the Duboisian double consciousness of many African Americans, asserting, "Blacks who see with the eyes of white Americans. [*sic*] No vision of their own. Most of them don't have the courage to step outside the mold that the European, the Westerner created."¹³⁹

Referring to Fard, he warns, "We are in these traps and predicaments not because of our doing, but because of foreign people have dictated to us where we should go."¹⁴⁰ According to Mohammed, Elijah Muhammad did not originate Yakub and the idea that white people were devils, the FOI, the MGT-GCC, or the University of Islam, for

¹³⁸ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 27.

¹³⁹ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 128.

¹⁴⁰ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 87.

example. Fard gave the Honorable Elijah Muhammad all of this, and he implies that it was corrupting, "It came from a foreigner. And that's why it was unsuccessful."¹⁴¹

With respect to the contamination of black values and behaviors, he attributes such to white people and white cultural values and behavior generally. Indigenously black movements like the Civil Rights movement and Black Nationalism (though he is critical elsewhere) were movements in which God was active. They had "God before it and over it."¹⁴² He suggests that segregation preserved, kept pure, these black ways of being that were different from whites. Once the Jim Crow signs were removed, he maintains, black people did not need God anymore, and black communities witnessed the genesis of drug abuse and "unnatural sex!"¹⁴³ This contagion [i.e., white foreign influence] seems to include atheism and same-sex relationships. He proclaims:

Trying to show the White man that you can beat him at unnatural sex, and he's been practicing it for many years before you! . . . [and now black people are]¹⁴⁴ all kinds of freaks. . . . In our community, if a boy was a sissy, he was scared, afraid to show it. He would try to walk like a man. He was afraid that he would be jumped on and beat up by another boy. Look what we have done in the face of opportunity. . . .¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 86-7.

¹⁴² Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 122.

¹⁴³ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 122.

¹⁴⁴ Emphasis is mine.

¹⁴⁵ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 122.

This statement, at least for Mohammed, reveals the homophobia that he believes was a normal and acceptable value in African American culture. He suggests that threats of violence were imminent possibilities for young boys who were gay. Yet, he talks about it as though this was a positive attribute of black morality that whites corrupted through a loosening of the barriers separated the communities. He espouses a particularly low view of “homosexuality” conflating it with bestiality as an immorality: “All the things that we read about in the Bible are being done today. Homosexuality and going with animals it’s in the Bible.”¹⁴⁶ Because of the opportunities that African Americans now have, he contends, they have attempted to imitate the ways of whites, immoral behaviors in which whites have engaged for years.

As part of this pathology, African Americans have even accepted white religious images as sacred, such as Jesus, God, heaven, and angels.¹⁴⁷ But, he sees white religious iconography as particularly deleterious to the black self-image:

We have churches in our neighborhoods that have huge statues that they claim to be representations of God, angels, saints, etc. I think that has a way of suggesting subtly to the minds of *Black* that you are not included. That, the *White Race*¹⁴⁸ has a monopoly on the Divine Order. I’m a student of psychology too, and I know there are some real justifications for my position in psychology.

¹⁴⁶ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 65.

¹⁴⁷ Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Emphasis is mine.

We have started a campaign to get Christian Preachers, especially those of our race to accept to remove those statues.¹⁴⁹

Mohammed maintains that white religious iconography signifies black exclusion from the divine metaphysic and that it establishes “white” as transcendental and ultimate. He implies that the issue has deep psychological ramifications and that as a “student of psychology,” he is qualified to make such assertions. His terminology here is curious, however. Observe that his selection of race nomenclatures (i.e., White Race, Black), even his use of the term “race,” indicate that by the late 1970s and early 1980s when some of the material in *Religion on the Line* was produced, Mohammed was already revising his positions on race.

Recall that in the mid-1970s he preferred the terms “Caucasian” and “Bilalian” because he believed that they lifted conversations about ethnic relations out of the historically accumulated weight of racism and that they were more dignified terms. Notwithstanding, white religious images were another form of foreign objects that pervaded the minds of African American and the physical spaces in which they worship the Divine.¹⁵⁰ One should not miss the confluence of an Islamic doctrinal issue at this moment, though. Mohammed’s appeal for a removal of white images was also motivated

¹⁴⁹ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 75.

¹⁵⁰ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 130. In March 1977, he founded CRAID: “Committee for the Removal of All Images that attempt to portray the Divine.”

by a desire not to anthropomorphize the Divine (*shirk*).¹⁵¹ It is for this reason that he most likely objected to suggestions that African Americans have black images of the Divine, rather than white ones.¹⁵²

Where the negative trope of the foreign/er plays out the most intensely, nonetheless, is in the area of leadership or put another way, in who leads black people and who is qualified to be an authentic black leader. Once more, he uses the notion of foreigner to establish himself as an organic and authoritative leader who is unique in his standing with the black community. Referring to himself, he proclaims “Allah just wants a good model in society.”¹⁵³ He laments that African Americans had been following everyone else’s model: Arab, Irish, Catholic, African, English, “and for once we have a model that is our own.”¹⁵⁴ Never before has such a leader existed who was as independent and indigenous than he,¹⁵⁵ for to identify with him is to take on “a new independent mind,”¹⁵⁶ a new culture, and leadership. He emphasizes his belief that his level, style, and independent category of leadership are revolutionary in that they have the power to change black people:

¹⁵¹ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 75-6; 81-2.

¹⁵² Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 75.

¹⁵³ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 74.

¹⁵⁴ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 74.

¹⁵⁵ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 29.

¹⁵⁶ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 48. Cf.

Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 65-6.

If African-Americans can come under this spirit under this influence, this will put the African-American spiritually on the solid ground for the first time. The African-American people, because of the past experience of slavery, distrust, no opportunity for Blacks to show that they can be trusted—and whenever they got the opportunity the White man undermined the trust. We still haven't come under to a position where we can trust Black leadership. We don't follow Black leadership.

Slavery has caused African Americans not to trust one another, according to his statement. For this reason, they do not follow black leadership. He has indicated earlier the incredible deference and authority that he thinks black people invest in whiteness. Therefore, that he perceives that he is in such an authoritative position of leadership with black people is an upheaval of historic and extant epistemological authority. He does not answer to anyone who is white, nor is he unduly influenced by them, he says, "The learned, they understand what I am saying. This is no ordinary leader, you have the boss. I am not bragging, believe me. I do not like bragging. I am not boastful. . . I am the boss! Allahu Akbar!"¹⁵⁷ Given black people's history with white paternalism, that the leadership of African Americans be (independently) black is critical for him (He is also critical of African American leaders who are "backed" or "influenced" by Jews).¹⁵⁸ He explains, "Dear beloved people, we have to have a grip on our life. We have to have leaders that are not made by the outsiders. You have never been successful with a leader

¹⁵⁷ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 48.

¹⁵⁸ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 132.

that was made by an outsider.”¹⁵⁹ He concedes, even as he pleads, that many African Americans have a difficulty seeing as authoritative someone who is from their own community, who arises out of his relationship with that community, “You cannot break with a foreign image. You cannot break with an image of a man that is not you.”¹⁶⁰

The second area against which he establishes himself as an authority using the negative (i.e., over against) trope of the foreigner is in his right to interpret Islam in the face of immigrant Muslims who want to challenge his “orthodoxy” and agency. For Mohammed, it is his right, his duty, to interpret religious truth as a black man for a black religious community. Because he asserts his authority to do so and he is not white and foreign, he considers it a miracle that such a man as he exists, and he expresses this anecdotally and, I believe, sarcastically:¹⁶¹

This is a miracle. This is a modern day miracle! **And I am not White, either!**

This is a modern day miracle. It has finally happened! The Hon. Elijah Muhammad was a Black man, and he could not tell Black people that ‘Look, God told me.’ He had to say, ‘Our Saviour.’ They asked, “What color is he.’ He answered, ‘He’s a Blackman, but he has straight hair, light, white man’s features, and he wasn’t from over here, he was a foreigner.’ They say, ‘Oh yes, then, Allah, thank Allah.’ Father Divine was a Black man. He said, ‘I am God.’

They asked, ‘Upon what basis, what proof are you God, Father Divine?’ ‘On the

¹⁵⁹ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 51.

¹⁶⁰ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 1, 89.

¹⁶¹ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 29.

basis of this son, Jesus Christ. 'Oh Father Divine, yes, whatever Father Divine wants is alright with me.' Right? Because somewhere in the background, is a white father yes! Here comes the Imam, Warith Deen Muhammad. They say, 'who is your power?' 'Allah!' 'Who is Allah?' 'God.' 'How does he look?' 'He doesn't have any looks!' They say, 'Well, who is he then, Brother Imam, what is this that you believe in?' 'God!'¹⁶²

Mohammed, here, makes a political, albeit theological, move by locating the source of his authority in a source which can neither be verified or falsified, nor can it adequately be challenged by religious authorities who make the same epistemological claim to revelation or access to transcendent data. He concedes nothing to those who would challenge his knowledge; he simply dismisses them as foreigners or those who privilege the opinions and veracity of their particular social locations, especially if they are white. He wants his audience to apprehend the profundity of his claim in the context of their historic experience with whites, and he does so by stating the obvious but necessary, "And, I am not White, either!" What a claim!—to have the authority and knowledge to espouse religious truths and be neither a foreigner nor white, but exactly the opposite, a black organic religious leader.

Along those same lines, Mohammed was aware that immigrant Muslims were suspicious of the authenticity of his group of African American Muslims, and that clearly created some tension between groups of Muslims in America. He replies,

¹⁶² Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 29-30.

I believe the majority of them accept us, but, I do feel that there is still a strain on our relationship. Too many of the immigrant Muslims in the U.S. seem suspicious. They can't believe that we are really as genuine as we appear to be.¹⁶³

Yet, Mohammed was only modestly interested in accommodating immigrants with respect to his group's Islamic praxis, especially their genesis in Fard's and Muhammad's NOI. He seemed unwilling to denounce their NOI origins because he understood the teachings on a deeper level:

So-called orthodox Muslims hate me for continuing to bring up the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and presenting him in a favorable light. Some have told me that I should stop talking about Dr. Fard and my father. They say it just brings up confusion and holds the community back. I know what they know not.¹⁶⁴

To be sure, Mohammed's language about Islam is that of universality, but his response, in this instance, is consistent with what this chapter has argued, namely, that he privileged particularity, saw the social and symbolic aspects of the religion as both significant, and to that end, is able to dismiss "so-called orthodox" immigrant Muslims as outsiders, foreigners, who could not possibly understand, hence: "I know what they know not."

Mohammed takes his right to interpret the religion to its logical conclusion when he suggests that African Americans should develop their own Islamic belief system. This

¹⁶³ Muhammad, *Religion on the Line*, 68-9.

discursive independence is directed at two central elements in Islamic thought: The Qur'an and the Law (*sunna*). First, Mohammed expounds on the Qur'an autonomously (*tafsir*), but without reference to external or foreign sources. He concludes arrogantly, [that it is the] "First time. This is the first time that one of us have [*sic*] come to God without a man leading us. Allah is my witness, I have come to God without a man leading me."¹⁶⁵ He surmises, "And that is salvation for us."¹⁶⁶ Second, he argues for a new [African American] school of law, a "*fiqh*," distinct and independent reflections (*ijtihad*) on such law distinct from the Maliki, Hanifi, Hanbili, and Shafi'i schools (which he mentions) and the traditional sources, which will serve as the basis for community building.¹⁶⁷ Such a divine law should come from the minds of black people and serve their interests.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about Warith Deen Mohammed and the body. Suffice it to say that he was interested in advancing the Nation's standing among Muslims in the world, but he was first and foremost focused on constructing "Islamic" black bodies *out-of-place* symbolically since he was so concerned with countering racism and deploying Islam as a

¹⁶⁵ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 30.

¹⁶⁶ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 30.

¹⁶⁷ Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, Vol. 2, 32-5.

religion, history, and culture that would uplift and beautify them. What he found as he and the NOI-WCIW embraced Sunni Islam, it appears, is that to be Muslim in a global sense means that one has to assent to a universalism that was inappropriate for all cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts. Therefore, while Mohammed preached this universalism as the ideal, his practice was actively particular. What is most significant about this is that it represents a crucial implied critique of Islam that he never makes explicit discursively but one which is glaringly obvious in the entire corpus of his works in the 1970s and 1980s.

One of the most critical aspects of Islam as Mohammed understood it was that, while the body was central, the symbolic and social aspects carried more weight, even though the social was more significant for Mohammed than for his father, albeit less than for Malcolm. That is, the social and political praxis, while important, was not commensurate with the moral teachings and the ideological and theological precepts of Islam. That is, physical bodies were to be engaged socially in serving humanity, participating in the political process, and engaging in economic uplift. On the other hand, racial, moral, religious, cultural, and theological (symbolic) discourses from which the body also receives meaning that reflects a given collective culture's ideals and their cosmologies, were tantamount.

This posture places Mohammed in tension with both of his predecessors, his father Elijah Muhammad and his friend Malcolm X. The former privileged the symbolic over the social, while the latter reversed this paradigm and gave increased importance to the social. At the same time, Mohammed's Islam was consistent with that of his predecessors in that their "Islams" reflected a similar tension between the universal and

the particular. To be sure, this focus on race, his critique of white supremacy and of America, and his insistence on existential relevance to black life constructed Mohammed's black bodies *out-of-place*, both in terms of the American social order and Islamic ideals (i.e., *ummah*) and practice. But, again, these were black bodies that would have been perceived as symbolically *out-of-place*.

This chapter also argues that race and the experience of being racialized was the primary lense through which he interpreted Islam as the *Mujadid* (reformer) and the *Mujtihad* (interpreter of law) for his community. At the same time, race and racism in America also created some unique problems for this African American religious group. Namely, how does one construct a meaningful identity when one's body has been negated and constructed as inferior through violent actual and discursive practices? Mohammed sought to circumvent the trappings of a racialized identity that rendered black bodies inferior by associating black identity with a historic figure, Bilal Ibn Rābāh, a seventh-century Ethiopian-born Muslim slave, who was one of the early converts, a close a companion to the Prophet Muhammad, and the first muezzin or prayer caller in the tradition. For Mohammed, African Americans were "Bilalians."

This identity was not without its serious problems, however. It implied erroneously, for example, that notions of race negated and were mutually exclusive form tenets of culture and history. Like Islamic universal identity and practice, Bilalian identity was reified and totalizing. Rather than asserting a heterological critique or local counter-narrative to the metanarratives of white supremacy and of Islam, it fixes and makes metaphysical "Bilal" as a grand narrative for African Americans and black people worldwide. In addition, it reveals Mohammed's religious chauvinism and arrogance in that he

believes that a Muslim icon that he alone selects can stand as a symbol for an entire “race” of people, on all continents and in all walks of life. And of course, he ignores the issue of gender in this matter and views maleness as normative. Mohammed takes such discursive privilege, given that he views himself as the unique and authentic leader of black people.

Mohammed negates things foreign in order to establish his authority as an African American leader and as a religious leader. Foreign ideas, images, and people function as contaminants which inhibit African American communities from realizing their full potential and humanity. This view of the black communities as needing protection from outsiders who would seek to invade it and control it corresponds to his idealized view of the body as an object to be policed and reflected upon, because it indicates Allah’s creative activity. This may necessitate the kind of body-centered morality that he indicates in his speeches and writing—codes and discourses that are focused on what goes into the body (i.e., food, drugs), what goes on the body (e.g., “pimps clothes”), what comes out of the body (e.g., foul language), and what people do with their bodies (e.g., “unnatural sex”), which of course is regulated by interdictions and by ritual control such as putting one before the congregation and shaming him/her for deeds that are deemed not in the interest of the collective. It is not surprising to note that Mohammed does not see Islam as a foreign element invading black communities, but rather overstates it as the authentic religion of African Americans that was pervasive in the life of the West African slave ancestors.

Chapter Six

Mothership Connections¹: Louis Farrakhan as the Culmination of Muslim Ideals and Black Bodies *Out-of-Place* in the Nation of Islam

Chapter One of this project laid the parameters for the study, which was to explore the nature of the body in four critical moments in the history of the NOI, represented by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan, paying close attention to the discourses and practices that were efficacious in reconstructing black bodies that were negated in the society generally. Moreover, it utilized Mary

¹ Farrakhan uses the term “Mother Wheel” and “Mother Plane” (MP). I will use Mothership as a variable synonym. It was a term also used in the NOI, especially by Malcolm X. See, Chapter Four. “Mothership Connection” is a term that comes from the 1970s funk music stars Parliament (Funkadelic). The album cover features an African American in funk-inspired space clothes floating out of the entryway of a spaceship in orbit. Cf. Parliament. *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca, 1976. My title is plural, “Connections,” because I believe that several of the important events, ideas, and practices in Farrakhan’s NOI can be traced to inspiration of the Mother Plane. I also recognize Theodore Walker, Jr.’s *Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), but Parliament, rather than Walker’s book, was the inspiration for the title of this chapter.

Douglas' notion of "dirt" to advance a theory, "black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*," that frames this study. The theory attempts to explain the actual and symbolic violence that is directed at black bodies in the U.S. It argues that the social system acts, sometimes violently, against black bodies when they are perceived to be *out-of-place* socially and/or symbolically, in other words, when they are viewed as violating given social and/or cosmological orders. A body that is perceived to be socially *out-of-place* refers to a physical body that has contravened determined geographical boundaries or is engaging in activity that is seen as violating the social order. It should also be said that a black body that is perceived to be symbolically *out-of-place* is a body that is seen to inhabit a higher than acceptable social status, one that is more oppositional or intelligent than existing stereotypes, or one that is seen to have a greater self-regard or self-esteem so that it challenges or dislodges prevailing discourses and beliefs about it.

The more common occurrence is perceived social *out-of-placeness*. For example, Cornel West describes being in an affluent area of New York (on a Park Avenue corner) and his attempts to hail a cab. Nine cabs failed to stop and pick him up, according to West, which infuriated him by this point. Subsequently, a tenth cab passed him up, only to stop for a "kind, well-dressed, smiling female fellow citizen of European descent."² Not refusing the fare but apparently aware of West's treatment, the lady only replied, "This is really ridiculous, is it not?,"³ as she entered the tenth cab that had rendered West's black body invisible. Furthermore, West reflects on the three times that police

² Cornel West. *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

³ West, *Race Matters*, xxv.

stopped him while he was driving through a residential, apparently upscale, neighborhood in Princeton during the first ten days he was in the city.⁴

On the other hand, West offers an anecdote that may illustrate perceived social and symbolic *out-of-placeness* occurring simultaneously. West, who describes owning what he calls “a rather elegant”⁵ car, tells of an episode in which he traveled by automobile from New York to Williams College in Massachusetts. He reports that he was accosted on trumped up charges of cocaine trafficking and attempted to explain who he was to a police officer. In his own words, “I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, ‘Yeh, and I’m the Flying Nun. Let’s go, nigger!’”⁶ He admits that others like Rodney King and those who have been subject of the FBI’s efforts have had much more violent experiences than his, but he makes the point, it seems, that even as an educated professional he has been subject to disconcerting treatment, which this project maintains has to do with his body being viewed as *out-of-place* symbolically because he made the claim of being a professor and socially because he was most likely driving an expensive care in an area or route in which black bodies were suspect. Conversely, bodies that were *in-place* did not challenge or dislodge the system in any meaningful way. They were complacent, buffoonish, lazy, impoverished, and ignorant. What’s more, they ate “slave” food like greens, black-eyed peas, and pork. Largely defined by the racist social system, these

⁴ West, *Race Matters*, xxv.

⁵ West, *Race Matters*, xxv.

⁶ West, *Race Matters*, xxv.

black bodies *in-place* pose no threat to the social system and are viewed as acting in accordance with prevailing negative discourses about black people. Finally, Chapter One offers a brief history of the NOI and notes moments and practices that were particularly relevant to the body.

Chapter Two explored Elijah Muhammad's critical perspective on black bodies that were seen as the antithesis of the bodies that were constructed in the rituals and discourses of the NOI. For Muhammad, these anathematized black bodies were deplorable religiously, socially, and aesthetically because they were "*in-place*"—that is, they were sell outs, "slaves," and worst of all they were Christians. As the religion given to African Americans by the "slave master," "Negro" Christians represented the epitome of *in-place* bodies—bodies that have totally bought into white supremacy, or rather, black inferiority. Grounded in the mythology of Yakub, which is the guiding historical and cosmological narrative of the NOI, Muhammad draws upon the idea that Christian ideology functioned in the service genocide of black people by helping to conceal the intent of nurses, doctors, and so on, who were killing darker ("black") babies in order to engineer or graft white people from the lighter ones. In short, Christianity is a vile and violent religion that be used to "whitenized" black bodies ideologically and render them meaningless in attempts to teach black people their true divine and Muslim nature and their history as the Original People of the universe.

Chapter Three describes Elijah Muhammad's creative project to fashion ideal black bodies. The chapter argues that these ideal black bodies were bodies whose ultimate meaning was located in the cosmos, that is, in the mythology of the NOI that suggested that black people were related to beings on other planets, some of whom lived

for centuries and grew to nine feet tall. Chapter Three also introduced the “ideal black bodily economy,” which describes the characteristics of sublime black bodies in Muhammad’s imaginary and as the actual bodies he was attempting to fashion. As a metaphor for these black bodies because of its size, destructive power, and technical wizardry, the Mother Plane would come at the end of the age of and reveal and uncover black bodies as the ultimate bodies in the universe. As an enclavist religious leader who avoided political protest and social engagement with systems and structures of oppression, these were bodies, that while *out-of-place*, privileged the symbolic over the social, meaning that Muhammad focused on teaching religious disciples and not on making activists who would challenge the social system through direct protest and confrontation.

Chapter Four maintains that Malcolm X reversed or inverted Muhammad’s paradigm in that he privileged the social over the symbolic. In other words, he advocated that black bodies physically be involved in the Civil Rights movement and in activities that directly impacted the freedom and life qualities of African American communities. Malcolm, the Chapter Two suggests, grew frustrated over the apolitical enclavist posture of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI. He believed that, if involved, the NOI could have a greater impact on the black struggle for civil and human rights than any other organization. It follows, then, that his longing to be involved and his growing frustration over the inactivity of the NOI represented an implied critique of Muhammad’s theology and millenarianism. That is, part of the justification for Muhammad’s apolitical rejection of direct engagement was a result of his millenarian belief that God would return and, via the Mother Plane, judge those who had enslaved and lynched black people. That

Malcolm X expressed frustration that Muslims were not actively engaged may indicate his disbelief in Muhammad's theology and his own nascent progressive philosophy and theology regarding race that was in development prior to his hajj to Mecca, rather than after, as popular representations such as the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* maintain.

Chapter Five examines Warith Deen Mohammed's⁷ Islamic thought and praxis after he took over the leadership of the NOI in 1975. It argues that he elevated the social but that it failed rise to equal status with the symbolic, given that religious "orthodoxy," acquisition of culture and history, and a discursive assault on racism were most significant to how he understood what it meant to be Muslim and African American. At the same time, Mohammed maintained his commitment to managing the tension between being African American and being Muslim, a tension that characterizes African American Islam generally. Chapter Five argues that his focus on "race" was an attempt to dislodge black bodies from the negative history and effects of race and racism. Instead, like his father Elijah Muhammad, he desired black bodies to be "cultured" as a response to the negative meanings of black bodies as "raciated," in an attempted to give bodies new valor and meaning. For him, being "cultured," meant incorporating the doctrine, history, and rituals of Sunni Islam.

Chapter Six will pay special attention to Louis Farrakhan by suggesting that his Islamic thought and praxis is the aggregate of all of his predecessors: Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Warith Deen Mohammed. Most importantly, Farrakhan gives his most

⁷ Warith Deen Mohammed on September 9, 2008 died during the composition of this chapter.

poignant expression of the nature and meaning of the black body in his discourses on his mystical experiences with the Mother Plane, or what he calls the Mother Wheel.⁸ Embodying an aggressive discursive, intellectual, and confrontational engagement of America and the U. S. government, Farrakhan's numinous and sociopolitical response to the meaning of the Wheel reveals the pinnacle of black bodies *out-of-place* socially and symbolically. This esoteric, mystical, and epistemological experience of the Wheel is the organizing metaphor for interpreting black bodies, and it indeed provides the necessary narrative that gives ultimate coherence and purpose to his life and ministry. Finally, as the culmination of all of his predecessors, Farrakhan elevates social and symbolic *out-of-placeness* to equal status.

Visionary Beginnings: Meeting the Messenger and the Membership of a Minister

Born Louis Eugene Walcott on May 11, 1933,⁹ Minister Louis Farrakhan is the leader of the reconstituted¹⁰ Lost-Found Nation of Islam that "began" in 1977.¹¹ A

⁸ See, Louis Farrakhan. *The Announcement: A Final Warning to the U. S. Government* (Chicago: FCN Publishing Company, 1989, 1991), 6.

⁹ Mattias Gardell. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 119.

¹⁰ "Reconstituted" indicates that the existence of the NOI is disjunctive rather than continuous. Under Warith Deen Mohammed, the NOI existed as such for less than a year before it morphed into the World Community of Islam in the West (WCIW) and later into

former member of the Episcopal Church, calypso singer, and night-club act, Farrakhan had encountered Elijah Muhammad in the early 1950s, but it was in 1955, when he was performing at a Chicago nightclub called the Blue Angel, that a friend suggested that he hear Messenger Muhammad deliver his Saviour's Day address.¹² This encounter left a lasting impression on Farrakhan, and it led to his joining the Nation. Karl Evanzz contends that Elijah Muhammad manipulatively "targeted" Farrakhan, then Lewis Walcott, and his wife Betsy¹³ (now Khadijah Farrakhan) for membership:

the American Muslim Mission, both incarnations had Sunni emphases even though Mohammed maintained his commitment to the particularities of race. The group that Farrakhan "founded" was in many ways a "new" NOI, in that many former members followed Mohammed into Sunni Islam. While data are unclear regarding just how many members followed Farrakhan "back" into the NOI, the numbers appear to be nominal. See, Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*; Clifton Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD and London, 2000); Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005).

¹¹ Jabril Muhammad ed. *Closing the Gap: Inner Views of the Heart, Mind & Soul of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan* (Chicago: FCN Publishing Co., 2006), x-xi, esp. xi. Apparently, Farrakhan made the announcement to actor Brock Peters that he was rebuilding the Nation.

¹² Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*, 120; J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 110.

¹³ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 333.

Midway through his sermon, the Messenger looked directly at Walcott and said, 'Brother, don't pay attention to how I speak. Pay attention to what I'm saying.' To Walcott, it seemed as though the Messenger was reading his thoughts. How, for instance, did the Messenger know he was in the audience? How did he know where he was sitting in the cavernous auditorium? As it turned out, Muhammad was told before he started his lecture that Walcott was in the audience, and knew exactly where he was sitting. He was also advised that Walcott had gone to college, this at a time, when fewer than 5 percent of all Black Muslims did so. What Walcott would later describe as a miraculous encounter was nothing more than a ruse—and it worked like a charm. Walcott's wife joined the NOI that same day, and Walcott himself joined the Boston temple a few months later after hearing Malcolm X lecture.¹⁴

How did Muhammad know that Farrakhan was present, and how did he have pertinent personal information about him? Evanzz indicates that Muhammad had been given information regarding Farrakhan's presence, that is, who he was, his occupation, and his education. This also suggests that Muhammad and members of the NOI saw Farrakhan as a desirable member (and potential minister, according to Evanzz) and that someone connected to Farrakhan in some significant way, perhaps one of his friends, had passed on his personal data to Muhammad or someone who had access to him.

¹⁴ Karl Evanzz. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 168-9.

Unaware of this, Farrakhan was enchanted, even “frightened,” by Muhammad’s air of mystery and insight, and as a result, he became a registered Muslim, a disciple of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, before the end of that year.¹⁵ Farrakhan reflects:

I was a little frightened that he seemed to know what I was thinking. But then he told me, ‘Don’t pay any attention to how I’m saying it, you pay attention to what I’m saying and then you take it and put it in that fine language that you know. Only try to understand what I’m saying.’ The rest of the afternoon his teaching was on the birth of a Savior. Now I enjoyed what I heard, but I wasn’t overwhelmed to the point where I was going to get up and join. . . But out of respect for my Uncle I got up and went and got my [membership]¹⁶ form.¹⁷

Farrakhan indicates that, while he was bewildered by Muhammad’s ability to “read” his mind, he did not rush to join the Nation that day as did his wife. His wife had joined immediately, and his brother was to join shortly thereafter.¹⁸ Farrakhan had some apprehension that points distinctly to extant class issues at the time, namely, that Muhammad’s broken speech signified to him that the Messenger was uneducated. He acknowledges that the leader’s lack of articulation was at the forefront of his consciousness when Muhammad advised him to listen to “*what*” he was saying rather

¹⁵ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 114, 234-5.

¹⁶ Emphasis is mine.

¹⁷ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 333.

¹⁸ Evanzz. *The Messenger*, 169; J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 333.

than “*how*” he delivering it, and Farrakhan says, “He [Muhammad] seemed to know what I was thinking.”¹⁹ Muhammad’s instincts were correct, says Farrakhan:

I, being a student of English, and verb and subject agreement, heard him speak in a manner that a public speaker who was familiar with English wouldn’t do. So in my head I said, ‘O this man can’t even talk.’ When I said that he looked right at me and said, ‘Brother, I didn’t get a chance to get that fine education that you got. When I got to school the doors were closed. . . You pay attention to what I’m saying and then you take it and put it in that fine language that you know. . . But looking back I see that he literally gave me my assignment the first day that he laid eyes on me.’²⁰

At the same time, this experience between Muhammad and Farrakhan also signaled Muhammad’s class consciousness, that vis-à-vis Farrakhan, who was college educated, he might seem oratorically unsophisticated and intellectually unqualified, and Muhammad intimates that this may have given the young visitor doubts about the organization and its figurehead.

Obviously, Walcott eventually joined the NOI, but becoming a member was not without its problems, however. He returned to his home in Long Island, New York after the Saviour’s Day convention, and it was several months before he visited an NOI temple [now called “mosque”]. He recalls:

¹⁹ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 333.

²⁰ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 334-5.

I went back to New York. This was February. I went back [to the meetings]²¹ maybe sometime—and March, April, May, June went by and in July I visited the Mosque. I think the first time I went may have been on a Friday night. Brother James 7X was teaching. But on that Sunday, when I went back then I heard Brother Malcolm, I got up and took my form out again. This was July 1955. August, September went by and around the 5th of October I got word that I received my “X”. I got my Student Enrollment on that Sunday and five minutes after I had it in my hand, I memorized the ten answers to the ten questions. So that next night I was ready to recite. After I recited, they said well Brother, you’re now Brother Louis 2X. Then I went to the class. At the end of the class they called up the new converts. When they called me up to welcome me into the F.O.I. [*sic*] The love that I saw in the eyes and the faces of the Brothers toward me was such a new and beautiful experience.²²

Here is an illustration of the NOI’s focus on issues of the body that we see coming to fruition in the religious life and ministry of Louis Farrakhan. The first noteworthy aspect of his recollection is that joining the NOI involved an intellectual reorientation, the beginning of which took the form of a short catechism in which new adherents had to learn, memorize, and formally publically recite undisclosed information. This learning symbolized that this new black body was an intellectual and religious body that possessed certain knowledge that was of a private nature.

²¹ Editor’s clarification, not mine.

²² J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 334.

This catechism allowed him to move to the next stage. Having received his “X” that would serve as his surname, which again, denoted that this body was no longer the old black slave body but a new religious one, he was ready to be affirmed by the religious community as such. After reciting the information that he suggests was elementary for him to learn, he was then accepted fully as “Louis 2X,” the “2” indicating that another “Louis X,” existed in the community—he was the second person to have that name. Naming, in this case, was significant because it was an indication to Farrakhan and the community that he was worthy to receive the teachings, rituals, and secrets of the universe, of which the NOI was the sole purveyor.

But this new name also signaled that this black body was ready to be the recipient of ritualized education that took the form of gender-specific regimentation and discipline that it would obtain as a newly embraced member of the F.O.I.—the Fruit of Islam. Having reached this stage, Farrakhan (the newly designated “Louis X”) was overtaken by the love and respect that men in the F.O.I showed him:

It was something that you longed to see in Black people. As I started to speak I broke down. But in that short little talk I said ‘I was going to take this teaching to every nook and cranny, or corner, of the United States of America.’ Those were the words that I spoke in October 1955.²³

In this statement, Farrakhan intimates that when he was going through the process of membership, he had a “call” experience in which he knew in this moment that it was his vocation to become a minister of the NOI and to ensure that its ideals were propagated

²³ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 334.

throughout the United States. In retrospect, Farrakhan ponders, Muhammad gave him the content of this calling in their very first encounter. Farrakhan understood Muhammad's first comments to him to mean that he was not only to promulgate Muhammad's teachings everywhere, but he was to translate them for a sophisticated and increasingly educated population, in a manner that the Messenger would not have been able to do.²⁴ Again, Muhammad's consciousness may indicate his increasing desire to reach more middle-class African Americans and also his goal that the NOI reflect more middle-class values and culture.

Once he did unite with the group and moved through the stages that would lead to full membership, he found that his lifestyle conflicted with the philosophy and program of the Nation. As he did with Muhammad Ali and his boxing career, Muhammad issued an ultimatum to Farrakhan that he must abandon the profession of singing and entertaining in order to become a full member of the NOI:

Then shortly thereafter the letter came, that all musicians had to get out of show business or get out of the Temple. I wasn't in the Mosque when the letter was read. The letter was read on a Sunday, but I was playing at *The Village Barn* in Greenwich Village. After my show I would come up to the Temple No. 7 Luncheonette at 120th Street and Lenox Avenue. . . I don't remember who it was who told me as I was sitting down having my soup. He said, 'Man the

²⁴ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 335.

Messenger sent a letter and everybody in show business had 30 days to get out of show business or to get out of the Temple'. . .²⁵

He later complied with some trepidation, only after having a vision that made his decision concrete and definitive. Farrakhan had begun worshipping at Temple Number 7, whose minister was none other than Malcolm X. Malcolm was impressed with him, he suggests, and gradually began to see him, not as a musician but as a potential NOI minister.²⁶ But it would take a mystical experience to move Farrakhan to choose the Nation over his entertainment career. Farrakhan reports:

It was the last day, the 30th day or just about December 26th, or the 27th when I had this engagement in the Nevele Club. Nevele is eleven spelled backwards. It was a Jewish resort. I just said I'm going to get it all out of my system. I sang ballad. I sang some classical. I sang the blues. I played some classical violin. I played jazz violin...[Afterwards]²⁷ I went home to go to sleep. In the night, I saw these two doors. One had *success* written over it and a mound in the floor that came up, maybe as high as this table. It was almost like a pyramid of diamonds and gold. But the other door had *Islam* over it with a black veil over the door. I was told to choose. And I chose Islam.²⁸

²⁵ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 336.

²⁶ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 335-7.

²⁷ Emphasis is mine.

²⁸ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 336-7; see also, 111-3; Cf. Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*, 120-1.

Like Malcolm X's prison vision of Master W. D. Fard Muhammad,²⁹ Farrakhan intimates that this vision was authoritative in its affect on his resolve to follow the NOI wholly.³⁰ His vision sets up the binary decision "success" or "Islam" as if to suggest that he could have had a prosperous life as an entertainer but gratuitously rejected such a life in lieu of his conviction regarding precarious circumstances of black people and the role that Islam could play in their liberation and transformation. Also like Malcolm's vision, Farrakhan does not indicate that his "vision" was a dream, but rather an active and conscious mental image that, for him, was real.³¹

Yet, the greater issue here involves the meaning of black bodies in the NOI. Why did Elijah Muhammad discourage participation in sports and popular performance arts like singing? One reason appears obvious. For Muhammad, black bodies in the NOI were

²⁹ Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 190; cf. 192.

³⁰ William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 460-5. It is interesting to note that for James mystical experiences are authoritative over those who have them but are private. The authority of such "mystical states," while numinous for the experience, are individualistic and "escape our jurisdiction," meaning that "no authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically" (460-1).

³¹ See 75n.

religious bodies, and as such, he exerted a certain amount of ritual “control”³² (or at least he seemed to desire such control) over these bodies. In other words, he wanted to regulate the practices, discourses, and behaviors that gave meaning to these bodies—bodies whose total religious ritualization (i.e., every aspect of their lives was religiously oriented and regulated in attempts to enact Muhammad’s edicts)³³ separated them from the mundane materiality of other black bodies and other bodies in general. As with the dietary rituals which sought to distinguish NOI bodies from black servility and everyday black bodies, Muhammad may have been reacting against a history of American entertainment, including sports, that has not only commodified black bodies for white interests and

³² Cf. Chapter Three of this project. We have already noted that such ritual control was not absolute, that members of the NOI adhered, sometimes arbitrarily, to the edicts and rituals of the Nation, and that women, in particular, utilized liminal ritual space to assert their own agency. See, Stephen C. Finley and Margarita L. Simon, “‘That Girl Is Poison’: White Supremacy, Anxiety, and the Conflation of Women and Food in the Nation of Islam,” in *Women and Religion in the World*, vol. 7, ed. Darnise T. Martin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Forthcoming). See also, Edward E. Curtis, IV, “Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12.2 (2002): 167-96; Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 107.

³³ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 167-73.

economic gain, but against bodies whose representations were ultimately under the control of whites.

Muhammad perceived black bodies as contested sights of representation,³⁴ whose depiction predominantly took the form of the obsequious, the buffoonish, the criminal, and the amusing (i.e., for a gaze)—all in service of white desire and domination (see Chapter One). As a result, Farrakhan, here, is forced to make a choice as to whether or not he will assent to this total religious ritualization of the NOI, and he reports this vision as confirmation that he has indeed made the correct choice and that the decision to leave the mundane arena of entertainment is an ultimate and religious one. In a sense, the choice at hand was whether or not his body would continue to be the site, like so many others, of American popular representation or of the Nation's "re-presentation"—that is, whether or not his body as a signifier of negative meanings about blackness would become a new signifier that points to a new signified—an ultimate body that reflects Muslim religious mythology and [black] middle-class values.

“Not Them, Just You”: The Minister, the Messenger, and the Mothership

³⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), 16.

It is significant that Minister Farrakhan links the vision that he had in 1955 to his experience of the Mothership or what he calls the “Mother Wheel.”³⁵ He suggests that the membership form that he completed in 1955 appeared in his vision. The form had a flip side on which something was written in cursive. Moreover, he encountered two voices—one instructing the other to, “Turn it [the form]³⁶ over, it’s not time for him to see this yet.”³⁷ At a subsequent Temple meeting, he saw Malcolm X write the words “Allah” and “Muhammad” on the board in Arabic, and he realized that this was the language that was written on his form in his vision.³⁸ He explains:

But the significance of that has been dawning on me, especially now. That was in 1955 and then 1985, or thirty years³⁹ later comes and I’m up on the Wheel.

³⁵ See, *The Wheel and the Last Days*. DVD, a speech by Louis Farrakhan (Chicago FCN Publishing Co., 1984); Minister Louis Farrakhan. *The Announcement*, 6; *The Reality of the Mother Plane*. DVD Set, a speech by Louis Farrakhan (Chicago: Final Call Publishing Co., January 4, 1987) ; *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*. DVD, 22 mins, interview by Ted Koppel (Hamilton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1998).

³⁶ Emphasis is mine.

³⁷ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 338.

³⁸ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 338.

³⁹ Being a proponent of the religious significance of numerology, Farrakhan repeatedly refers to the number “thirty.” Here, he suggests the relationship between important visions of the two doors and the cursive writing on the back of the membership form and later the vision of the “Wheel” are connected by thirty years. Elsewhere, he suggests that

Then this thing comes down and there's this cursive writing on it. I leaned forward to read it. Then the Honorable Elijah Muhammad speaks and whatever was on that screen disappears. I never consciously knew that I read it.⁴⁰

Farrakhan describes the vision retrospectively and suggests that its meaning only became clear when he experienced another visual revelation thirty years later. It is this later vision, he suggests, in which the meaning, purpose, and function of the earlier one comes to full fruition. He simply alludes to it here, but he describes the subsequent vision and assigns it the unreserved religious and political weight that he feels it deserves in numerous lectures, press conferences, and interviews that are delivered and conducted in from mid 1980s to the 1990s and beyond.⁴¹

Elijah Muhammad gave him "30" days to leave the entertainment industry (See, J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 336, and that he decided to leave Warith Deen Mohammed's Islamic movement after "thirty months" (J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 328-9), to begin to rebuild the NOI. He does not connect his uses of the number thirty, but he seems at least tacitly aware by the fact that he continues to point out these time periods. Remember that it was in "1930" that the NOI locates its founding. Nowhere is his numerology seen more publically and poignantly as in his Million Man March address called "Toward a More Perfect Union," on October 16, 1995. See, Louis Farrakhan. *Let Us Make Man: Select Men Only & Women Only Speeches* (Atlanta: Uprising Communications, 1996), 125-50.

⁴⁰ J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 338-9.

⁴¹ Cf. 35n.

Perhaps the most provocative version of this vision was announced in a press conference at the J. W. Marriott Hotel in Washington, D.C. on October 24, 1989.

Minister Farrakhan relates his experience of the Mother Wheel⁴² which he experienced as concrete on Tepozteco Mountain in Tepotzlan, Mexico, September 17, 1985.⁴³ It is cited here at length:

In a tiny town in Mexico, called Tepotzlan, there is a mountain on the top of which is the ruins of a temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl—the Christ-figure of Central and South America—a mountain which I have climbed several times. However, on the night of September 17, 1985, I was carried up on that mountain, in a vision, with a few friends of mine. As we reached the top of the mountain, a Wheel, or what you call an unidentified flying object, appeared at

⁴² Again, same as the Mother Plane and the Mothership.

⁴³ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*. A version of this same press conference is printed with additional commentary from Tynetta Muhammad and Jabril Muhammad in J. Muhammad, *Closing the Gap*, 377-88. The full text is also available online. See, The Honorable Louis Farrakhan, “International Press Conference, J. W. Marriott Hotel, October 24, 1989,” http://www.noi.org/statements/transcript_891024.htm/ (Accessed on September 12, 2008). Tynetta Muhammad. *The Comer by Night 1986* (Chicago, IL: The Honorable Elijah Muhammad Educational Foundation, 1986), 29-36. Mother Tynetta is a spiritual interpreter of events in the Nation of Islam. Here she ties Farrakhan’s international travels, numerology, and mystical practices to his UFO experience which she prints in full in her book.

the side of the mountain and called to me to come up into the Wheel. Three metal legs appeared from the Wheel, giving me the impression that it was going to land, but it never came over the mountain.⁴⁴

Farrakhan first lays the foundation by informing listeners that he was on a mountain which is the site of an ancient temple to Quetzalcoatl, a "Christ-figure," so that no doubt exists that what he is about to disclose is of a religious and mystical nature. He, I believe, wants to be viewed in light of Quetzalcoatl and to connect his mystical world to the minister's own and hence create a context for his vision of the UFO that casts him as a mystical sage of the ages. Michael Lieb comments similarly:

I emphasize the topographic and mythological dimensions of Farrakhan's account of his vision, first, because he calls attention to them himself and, second, because he is at pains to define himself and his experiences in these terms. Although he certainly does not say so explicitly, he would have himself viewed as a Quetzalcoatl-like figure whose own pilgrimages represent a return to some inchoate world of beginnings, a world that draws him into its matrix, there to undergo a process of individuation and reclamation. . . In such a guise, Minister Louis Farrakhan enacts his own visionary journey, one that represents in effect the receipt both of a new identity and of a renewed calling through his own version of the inaugural vision of Ezekiel.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 5-6.

⁴⁵ Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of the End Time* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 206.

Thus, his experience on the mountain in Tepotzlan marks the beginning of a new identity as mystical sage and chosen-apocalyptic spokesman for Farrakhan, but this numinous turn also signaled an enduring change in his candor and confidence in that he is able to speak boldly and openly about his experience such as in the interview that Ted Koppel conducted with him on Nightline on October 16, 1996.⁴⁶ In this interview, Farrakhan recounts his experience in Tepotzlan without any hint of trepidation.

Returning to Farrakhan's vision, he proceeds to describe the "Wheel" as an "unidentified flying object," and he suggests that three metal legs appeared from the Wheel, making him believe that the craft was going to land. Furthermore, the UFO as a circular or disk-like tripod (or three emanating beams of light) is a classic characteristic or feature of UFO reports and UFO depictions in fiction.⁴⁷ Based on similar racial themes as the Mothership in the NOI mythology, H. G. Wells, for example, depicts late nineteenth-century London as being watched and then invaded by a superior intellect, namely Martians. Written, in part, as a critique of colonial Europe and England, the novel questions what if Europe had been dominated by an alien life form like it has colonized

⁴⁶ *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*, 1998.

⁴⁷ See, Brenda Denzler. *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2001), 1-67, esp. 35-55. Danzler provides a short history of the field of ufology, including UFO "encounters."

“races” that it saw as inferior.⁴⁸ Similar to Farrakhan’s Wheel, the invasion vehicle or UFO that transports the aliens to conquer this world, which Wells codes as “the Thing,” is described as a “tripod,” having three metal support and mobility girders extending from the bottom of the craft.⁴⁹

Farrakhan continues with his lengthy press conference, suggesting that the experience frightened him, so he called for members of his party, who had accompanied him to the mountain.⁵⁰ Then, a voice from the Wheel replied, “Not them; just you.”⁵¹ He

⁴⁸ See, David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld. *A Critical Edition of The War of the Worlds: H. G. Wells’s Scientific Romance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ Hughes and Geduld, *The War of the Worlds*, 84. Cf. *The War of the Worlds*, VHS, 50mins., The Learning Channel Great Books (Bethesda, MD: Discovery Communications, Inc., 1996).

⁵⁰ Farrakhan and members of his inner circle such as Mother Tynetta Muhammad, once a secretary of Elijah Muhammad, now considered a Mother” of the Nation, frequently make pilgrimages to sacred and mystical religious site such as Sedona, Arizona. Sedona, in fact, has been the location of important religious experiences for them. Cf. Mother Tynetta Muhammad. “From Exodus to Project MXODUS.”

http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_4879.shtml (Accessed July 27, 2008).

In this article from Final Call News Mother Tynetta connects the spiritual treks and retreats at Sedona, Arizona to Farrakhan’s vision in Mexico—hence “MXODUS.” She says of her experience in Sedona, “I was reminded immediately of some of the mountain

suggests that the voice told him to relax while he was carried into the vehicle by a beam of light.⁵² Farrakhan elucidates his narrative further:

I sat next to the pilot, however, I could not see him. I could only feel his presence. As the Wheel lifted off from the side of the mountain, moving at a terrific speed, I know I was being transported to the Mother Wheel, which is a human-built planet—a half-mile by a half-mile that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had taught us for nearly 60 years. The pilot, knowing that I was fearful of seeing this great, mechanical object in the sky, maneuvered his craft in such a way that I would not see the Mother Wheel (Plane) and then backed quickly into it and docked in a tunnel. I was escorted by the pilot to a door and admitted into a room.⁵³

terrain, carved out in the Sacred Valley of Mexico, in the small village of Tepoztlan, where the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan received his vision-like experience in 1985, where he communed with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad on a huge space craft identified as the Mother Wheel.” The article includes a picture of the mountain terrain and included this interesting caption: “A view of the famous Bell Rock Vortex appearing like a miniature UFO.” Finally, note her use of the term “vision-like,” which may indicate her desire to communicate that this was an actual, bodily, event and not a vision or hallucination.

⁵¹ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 6.

⁵² Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 6.

⁵³ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 6.

Farrakhan represents events that for him were literal and physical occurrences. He says that after having been carried “into” the craft by a beam of light he was transported to the “Mother” Plane, inferring that the first “wheel” was not the primary vehicle but merely a transport craft that took him to the main one. While in the initial wheel, he indicates that he sat next to the pilot but that both pilot and the Mothership were concealed from his optical gaze but not from his psychical perception of their presence. After docking the Plane in a tunnel, the pilot escorted him into a room.

It was in this room where the meaning of the experience would become clear to him, and the concrete connection between this experience and his 1955 vision would be revealed. Farrakhan intentionally avoids describing this room, insisting that it is extraneous, except to suggest that it was in the center of the room that he heard the voice of his mentor and religious leader, Elijah Muhammad.⁵⁴ Muhammad, spoke (and he heard his voice) as clearly as the press conference audience heard his voice, Farrakhan contends, as he explains the substance of what he heard:

He [Elijah Muhammad]⁵⁵ spoke in short cryptic sentences and as he spoke a scroll full of cursive writing rolled down in the front of my eyes, but it was a projection of what was being written in my mind. As I attempted to read the cursive writing, which was in English the scroll disappeared and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad began to speak to me. He said, *‘President Reagan has met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan a war. I want you to hold a press*

⁵⁴ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 6.

⁵⁵ Emphasis is mine.

conference in Washington, D.C., and announce their plan and say to the world that you got the information from me on the Wheel.' He said to me that he would not permit me to see him at that time. However, he said that I had one more thing to do and when that one more thing was done that I could come again to the Wheel and I would be permitted to see him face to face.⁵⁶

Note that Farrakhan uses the phrase “cursive writing” metonymically to connect the 1985 events that he is describing to the media to the sacred images that he reported experiencing in 1955. Moreover, the trope is meant to evoke the earlier episode by which he was compelled to commit fully to the NOI after seeing cursive writing on the back of his membership form as part of the vision. To strengthen the linkage further, he uses the report of a voice addressing him in the first person, a voice, as in the 1955 vision, that he experiences as dislocated and not concrete. In other words, these were voices from “somewhere,” but he could only “feel” the bodies from which the voices emanated.

Farrakhan weaves a narrative connected by these two religious experiences against which his ministry must be interpreted, for in these accounts he locates his calling and ultimate purpose for his involvement in and leadership of the NOI, privileging the latter, which interprets the former. While it is unclear who in his press conference audience would have been aware of the former event, it appears that the latter, Mother Wheel, episode was meant to validate his leadership and his reconstitution of the NOI, given that the language and the “appearance” of Muhammad functions to give coherence and authority to his religious life. Farrakhan is masterful in drawing upon earlier NOI

⁵⁶ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 6.

mythology and invoking the very language and concepts of Muhammad (at times, he even calls the Mother Wheel the Mother “Plane” as the Messenger did) in order to connect his revelation, the meaning of which he has yet to be disclosed publically, to that of his mentor and religious leader. Furthermore, the fact that the Mothership narrative presupposes knowledge of his call experiences and 1955 vision may suggest that his message here was intended for multiple audiences.

Perhaps Farrakhan’s “Announcement,” that he suggests he was making because Muhammad directed him to do so, was meant for more than just the white media and the United States government. It is also possible that the announcement was intended for followers of Warith Deen Mohammad and rival NOI groups such as the ones that Silis Muhammad, John Muhammad, and Royall Jenkins led—groups that were all founded after the death of Muhammad, which claimed to be legitimate and authentic successors to Muhammad’s NOI and that Farrakhan, in reality, corrupted his teachings.⁵⁷ Yet, the most powerful “evidence” that Farrakhan is the genuine heir to Muhammad’s religion is his experience of Muhammad as physically alive and dwelling in the Mothership. It is this, in fact, that gives Farrakhan’s UFO vision the most significance vis-à-vis the meaning of black bodies and for him has relevance for all black bodies.

That is to say, Farrkhan’s vision implies that Elijah Muhammad exists bodily in some realm or dimension that is only epistemologically and experientially accessible to the mystically adept. Hence, his identification with Quetzacoatl constructs his identity

⁵⁷ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 180. Lieb suggests that at least a dozen such groups emerged after the death of Muhammad.

as an avatar or “Christ-figure” who has privileged if not exclusive spiritual gnosis, foresight, and experience, which has given him at least a glimpse of the ultimate wisdom and truth of the universe, in other words, the ultimacy of black bodies. While we will return to this idea that within the Mothership is coded the nature and meaning of black bodies, I wish to emphasize the point that part of the nature of black bodies that the Mothership reveals is that they (or at least some of them) render death irrelevant, given that they are enduring, that the animation and function of black bodies, as seen in the persistence of Muhammad, does not end with ostensible death. Jabril Muhammad, a close colleague of Farrakhan, (who was with him on Tepozteco Mountain in Tepoztlan) and author of the book called *Is It Possible That the Honorable Elijah Muhammad Is Still Physically Alive???*,⁵⁸ confirms this reading of the Mothership and what it uncovers about the persistence of such bodies. Regarding the possibility that Muhammad is alive, he claims:

The importance of that issue has been publicly heightened by means of the vision from the Honorable Louis Farrakhan to Minister Louis Farrakhan, on September 17, 1985, and the Minister’s report of it to America and the world. . . It is, of course, beyond the purpose of this introduction to this little book to go into those details necessary for the best understanding of the ‘vision’ of Minister Farrakhan, and how it relates to the fact that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is alive; is well; is in power; and is doing that which was written that he would do

⁵⁸ Jabril Muhammad. *Is It Possible That the Honorable Elijah Muhammad Is Still Physically Alive???* (Phoenix, AZ: Nuevo Books, 2007).

even as you read these words. . . Furthermore, Minister Farrakhan's experience in Mexico, was next to actually [*sic*] seeing him in his physical body. . . Certainly, many of us heard the Honorable Elijah Muhammad state that he would one day be with the God who raised him up and that he would return.⁵⁹

Noteworthy here is the acknowledgement that it is appropriate to read Farrakhan's description of his UFO "encounter" with Elijah Muhammad as an interaction with Muhammad's physical body, not an apparition or hallucination, albeit he was unable to gaze upon Muhammad directly. That is, that neither Jabril Muhammad nor Farrakhan view the incident as anything other than actual contact with the Messenger, not with a specter or mental anomaly. According to the Minister, a full and tactile experience in which he would be allowed to see Muhammad would come later: ". . .he said that I had one more thing to do and when that one more thing was done that I could come again to the Wheel and I would be permitted to see him face to face."⁶⁰ Jabril Muhammad offers additional evidence that Farrakhan's vision suggests that Muhammad is alive, namely, that the Minister states explicitly that Muhammad survives. Jabril maintains that Farrakhan spoke these words to him directly:

When I considered all of the scriptures, when I considered his direct words to me, and when I considered other things I heard, for the first time during that period, I then became convinced that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was in fact alive. Some months later, I remember being in the sitting room in my home

⁵⁹ J. Muhammad, *Is It Possible*, 5-8.

⁶⁰ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 7.

on Damen, and Brother Jabril was sitting in one of the chairs, and we were preparing for Saviours' Day 1981. I told him that I would announce at that Saviours' Day Conference that I believed that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was alive, was with his Teacher, and was in power.⁶¹

Notice that when Farrakhan makes this acknowledgement that Muhammad was "alive" bodily, he also observes that Master Fard Muhammad was also living. Furthermore, the two were together, meaning apparently, that the Mahdi and His Messenger were aboard the divine vehicle known as the Mothership or the Wheel. Finally, the Minister's words suggest that Muhammad (rather than Fard Muhammad) was sovereign by intimating that he was "in power." Likewise, the phrase "in power" also implies a certain conscious activity on the part of Muhammad—that things are still under control and moving toward the apocalyptic denouement that he prophesied in the Yakub narrative by suggesting that the Mother Plane would destroy and bring to an end the age of white domination.⁶²

As Farrakhan continues with explaining the significance of his vision, he suggests that it has a double meaning. While the original message that he received from Muhammad may have involved President Reagan and a war that ostensibly may have been directed at Moammar Qaddafi and Libya, the text of the revelation from Muhammad was ambiguous, Farrakhan reports, because it was to serve as a symbol for the deeper meaning of the communication—which was to be carried out several years

⁶¹ J. Muhammad, *Is It Possible*, 31.

⁶² See Chapter Three. See also, Elijah Muhammad. *The Mother Plane* (Maryland Heights, MO: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1992).

later by President George Bush as a covert war on black people, especially African American youth.⁶³ The Minister describes it in his press conference:

The reason that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad did not tell me who the President and the Joint chiefs [*sic*] of Staff had planned a war against was because Moammar Qaddafi, the Muslim Revolutionary leader, and the small nation of Libya, was only to serve as a sign of an even more significant and consequential war which would come several years later. I am here to announce today that President Bush has met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff, under the direction of General Colin Powell, to plan a war against the Black people of America, the Nation of Islam, and Louis Farrakhan, with particular emphasis on our Black youth, under the guise of a war against drug sellers, drug users, gangs and violence—all under the heading of extremely urgent national security.⁶⁴

Farrakhan proposes that Muhammad was deliberate about making his communications with him cryptic in the form of ambiguous utterances in order to give Farrakhan the time necessary to apprehend the dual and futuristic messages in Muhammad's words. Observe that Minister Farrakhan reports being taken up into the Wheel in 1985, but he does not hold the press conference until 1989, allowing for the necessary duration of time to acquire the full intent of the disclosure. And when he declares to the world the ultimate meaning of his religious leader's words, it is devastating: The true meaning and objective of the George Bush's "War on Drugs" is not "national security" but rather a genocidal

⁶³ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 9-10.

⁶⁴ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 9-10.

conspiracy by the United States government to destroy black bodies. Farrakhan does not make a point here to emphasize that Colin Powell, whom he cites as complicit in the pernicious plan, is also “black.” He simply points to the President and the government, especially the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as the culprits in the demonic plan.⁶⁵

Later, however, he does make an effort to mention Powell’s racial heritage and how Powell’s cultural identity was important in the conspiracy to destroy black people.⁶⁶ Generally, Farrakhan contends, when whites elevate an African American, it is because they intend to use him/her against other black people, as a means to deflect the charge of racism and to conceal racial motivations in particular actions and policies. It is integral to the conspiracy, Farrakhan implies:

Why would President Bush assign a Black man to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, jumping over 30 white men, who are reportedly more qualified, to be chairman? Ofttimes [*sic*], when a Black man is elevated to a high position, it is generally because of a desire to use him against the legitimate aspirations of his own people, or to use him as window-dressing to make the masses of Black people believe that an unjust system is working on their behalf.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 10-11. According to Farrakhan, the FBI has been working to destroy the NOI since 1940 via the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO).

⁶⁶ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 13.

⁶⁷ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 13.

Farrakhan makes the point that it is not he who is saying that many other white men were more qualified to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; he has heard rumblings to that effect, indicated by his use of the phrase “*reportedly* more qualified.”⁶⁸ In such an instance, it is illogical for a black person to hold such a position unless that person’s elevation to that post or rank was purposefully to be used surreptitiously in service of maintaining white domination. And Powell could also be used to justify sending African American, Hispanic, Native American, and parenthetically, poor white people to foreign lands such as Panama and Columbia and then onto Cuba and Africa to fight against liberation movements there, he intimates.⁶⁹ While Farrakhan is ambiguous about how all black bodies can inherit the experiences that he has had, he is intentional about connecting the Mother Wheel to all black bodies. It defines them all as esoteric and as the sites of divine ultimate concern in the cosmic contest between the forces of good and evil, which Farrakhan represents as “black” and white, respectively.

Farrakhan suggests that the representation of black bodies by the media works in concert with those governmental forces that want to destroy them. By portraying black youth in Southern California, New York, and Washington, D.C. as “Crips and Bloods,” drug dealers, and as violent and well-armed criminals, federal and local law enforcement may be seen by the public as justified in their violent treatment, incarceration, and focus on African American young people, under the pretext that such youth are a threat to national security. Farrakhan ends by warning the President and the government against

⁶⁸ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 13.

⁶⁹ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 13.

such a cabal meant to destroy him, the NOI, and black leadership in America, for African Americans are the “People of God,” and Allah will fight for their liberation⁷⁰:

And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and leave them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; ‘But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be fighting against God.’⁷¹

Farrakhan emphasizes again that this “announcement” pertains to all black bodies, that they are significant to God and are the recipients of God’s divine attention even though all black people are not literally members of the NOI. This warning was meant to reach the highest halls of government and into the shadows of the covert, where violent machinations are devised by those whose insidious goals entail the destruction of the [entire] black race. By making this declaration, Farrakhan makes a faulty question-begging assertion, however—a cardinal error that puts him in line with other African American religious traditions that have argued that God was on the side of black people and against oppression.⁷² Along this line of reasoning, he maintains that fighting against

⁷⁰ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 14-5.

⁷¹ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 15. Emphasis is the book’s not mine.

⁷² See, William R. Jones. *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). Jones exposes the serious methodological issues regarding such declarations and suggests that they are question begging because they assume “God” and God’s goodness, and they fail to prove that God is on the side of black people or that God has “chosen” them. Jones suggests that such faulty theological methodologies can

African Americans will, in reality, be a futile fight against God. Hence, black people are all God's people, and for him the Mothership proves it. Lest anyone seeks to mock him for his UFO-inspired warning to America, he reminds them that they will see "UFO's in abundance over the major cities in America"⁷³ and that the calamities that America was experiencing would increase to the end that they might humble themselves to the "Warning contained in this Announcement."⁷⁴

actually infer the opposite, that God is a white racist, who can just as easily be the cause of black suffering, since God has not prevented it or brought it to an end. The tradition that Farrakhan suggests is a prominent theme that has its roots in nascent nineteenth-century black theological development. Compare, for example, James H. Cone. *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); Anthony B. Pinn. ed. *Making the Gospel Plain: The Writings of Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), esp. 54, 67, 170-80; David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet. *Walker's Appeal and Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 2008).

⁷³ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 16; Cf. Farrakhan interprets the entire history UFOs in light of the Mothership. Although sightings of it were misrecognized and misrepresented as UFOs throughout history, they were all the Mother Wheel, which he also sees as Ezekiel's Wheel.

⁷⁴ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*, 16. Not only does Farrakhan constantly refer to Reagan here, he vociferously refers to him vis-à-vis the Mother Plane in speeches after his

experience. He suggests that Reagan (and President Carter) and the U. S. Government are aware of the existence of the Wheel, which they call a UFO. Cf. Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*; Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*. It is interesting to note that President Reagan apparently did believe in the existence of UFOs and in extraterrestrial beings. He refers to them in speeches that he delivers during his presidency. In a speech called "Remarks to Students and Faculty at Fallston High School" on December 4, 1985 he claimed in reference to his conversations with Soviet leader Gorbachev regarding U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations and defense (such as Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or what he called the "Star Wars" defense system) that the two countries should not have to be attacked by an "alien race" to realize all people are humans. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/120485a.htm/> (accessed on September 17, 2008). See also, "Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York" on September 21, 1987, in which President Reagan remarked, "I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world." Cf. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/092187b.htm/> (Accessed September 17, 2008). Both of these public addresses could have confirmed Farrakhan's suspicion that the U.S. government was aware of an extraterrestrial presence, i. e., The Mother Wheel. See also, Richard M. Dolan. *UFOs and the National Security State: Chronology of a Cover-up 1941-1973*, Revised Edition (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc., 2002). This text is an academic study of the U.S.

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government's research on UFOs. It indicates consistent and concentrated attention to the subject by the by the U.S.

⁷⁵ E.g, Sigmund Freud. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966); Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975); William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002); Carl G. Jung. *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Trans. R.C.F. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). At this point, it is important to add some brief interpretive remarks regarding Farrakhan's UFO encounters, and to suggest that they may be given some coherence through selected readings in the psychology of religion and theorized as a real experience that was response to exigent racialized circumstances that made the need for them exceedingly *apropos*, given that the threat against black bodies tied them all together in purpose, with respect to the UFO. In other words, the line of reasoning that I wish to pursue is not one that relegates Farrakhan's visionary experience (or Muhammad's for that matter) to the realm of science fiction or pathology. Rather, the experience was ontological in the sense that it had real and numinous affects on him. Another observation that I would like to make here is Farrakhan's longing desire to see Muhammad (and Fard) is a homoerotic experience that perhaps is deflected by the "Mother" (that is, the feminine) of the Mother Wheel. Although I would not interpret this

Not only do we advance the notion that was argued in Chapter Three—that the Mothership, functioning as a metaphor for black bodies,⁷⁶ reveals black bodies as

in terms of a Freudian Oedipal conflict (since there is no contest with a “father” over the “mother”), I do want to point out that Freud and to a certain extent Jung might see the wheel-like Mothership as a symbolic vagina into which Farrakhan was carried. While significant, extended psychoanalytic analysis is not possible in the space and context of this study.

⁷⁶ The MP functions as a metaphor for all black bodies in the sense that the NOI point to it as evidence that black bodies are superior intellectually—also evidenced by their telepathic abilities to hear the MP. It represents the beauty and majesty of black bodies. It also demonstrates the durability of such bodies given that this vast ship, which for Muhammad and Farrakhan is a small planet or city, can stay in outer space for long periods of time without entering the Earth’s atmosphere for air and without refueling. Suggesting that it is a planet means that the Mothership can be viewed analogically as a living organism. In fact, the plane was used in creation, to put mountains on the planets. Also, like original black people, the ship was created before Yakub made white people. In addition, the Wheel symbolizes black bodies in that it will be used to enact punishment upon America for its treatment of African Americans during slavery, for lynchings, and all manner of violence against black bodies. See, Elijah Muhammad. *The Mother Plane* (Maryland Heights, MO: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1992), 16-7; 49-50. Finally, as a vehicle of space travel, the Wheel connects African Americans to their people on Mars and Venus who live for more than one thousand years and can grow to nine feet

symbols of the collective culture and cosmology, it, furthermore, brings them to full idealized fruition as promulgated in the narrative of Yacub and uncovers their connection to mythological and cosmic origins that renders them transcendent. That is, the Yacub epoch, which ends with the return of the Mothership, connects black bodies to ultimate meaning that is not located in earthly sources and sociopolitical and historical spaces, which by no means, nonetheless, indicates that black bodies have no material or political relevancy. In the present case, the contrary was true—these were religio-political bodies, whose existence signifies the importance of sociopolitical conditions for the religious life and meaning for the Nation. Nowhere in NOI philosophy and theology is this more factual than in the ministry of Louis Farrakhan. Indeed, scholarly attention to the significance of the Mother Wheel for understanding Farrakhan's ministry and black bodies is all but totally absent in the literature.⁷⁷ To that end, this section will argue that

tall. The plane also carries within it the pilots which represent the four races of the black nation (i.e., black, brown, red, yellow) Muhammad, *The Mother Plane*, 25-7; 29. Yet, the Mothership is perhaps the most powerful representation of black bodies as the symbolization of NOI cosmology, in that it brings to bare all the mythological and cosmic meanings of the black body as transcendent and superior as reflected in the Yacub narrative.

⁷⁷ For example, Amy Alexander, ed. *The Farrakhan Factor: African American Writers on Leadership, Nationhood, and Minister Louis Farrakhan* (New York: Grove Press, 1998); Mattias Gardell. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Jim Haskins. *Louis Farrakhan*

an interpretation of the Mothership is a necessary condition for understanding the black bodies *out-of-place* socially and symbolically in Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

First, the Mother Plane establishes and discloses the reality of the meaning of black bodies. That is, Farrakhan had heard Elijah Muhammad teach about the Wheel for twenty years,⁷⁸ and with his personal contact with the Mothership, Muhammad's teachings became "real." Farrakhan knew then, if he had any doubts before, that all African American were God's special people and that God was a "man" just like he was

and the Nation of Islam (New York: Walker and Company, 1996); Frank Kelleter.

Con/Tradition: Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, the Million Man March, and American Civil Religion (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000); Clifton Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD and London, 2000); A. Marshall. *Louis Farrakhan: Made in America* (n.p.: BSB Publishing, 1997); Dennis Walker. *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005). Martha Lee briefly discusses the Mother Plane as a UFO in her chapter on Farrakhan, but she either resists Farrakhan's description of his experience with the Wheel, or she is unable to articulate the complexities of it because she refers to it as a "dream." She expresses no insight on what this "UFO" means for black bodies. See, Martha F. Lee. *The Nation of Islam, An American Millenarian Religion* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 119, 121.

⁷⁸ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 121. Lee cites Louis Farrakhan tying the teaching of the MP to Elijah Muhammad in *The Final Call*, January 31, 1987, p. 2.

and human just like black people. After all, he “saw” Muhammad and Master Fard in the Wheel.⁷⁹ To that end, we learn two important things from Farrakhan’s reflections on his vision. We have mentioned earlier that the Wheel nuances my perspective on the body in the NOI because it intimates that black bodies are persistent beyond the apparent cessation of the biological functions that would ordinarily be necessary to sustain life. Grounded in Master W. D. Fard Muhammad as the originary and ideal black body, Farrakhan is privy to the material veracity of Elijah Muhammad’s claims about black bodies being the preeminent bodies in the universe and their connectedness, as the ultimate and standard for humanity, to Master Fard, and in communicating this vision, he suggests to all black people that this, too, could be their destiny, albeit it can only be inferred that this destiny is accessible through Farrakhan as the Christ figure.

This actuality of persistent black bodies reveals the truthfulness of all of the history and teachings of Muhammad in that they come forcefully to empirical, biochemical, and cosmological verification in the concrete materiality of both Fard’s and Muhammad’s continued bodily existences. The other thing that we glean from this notion is that it has neither discrete implications for Farrakhan solely nor for physical bodies only, for as Farrakhan suggests in his lecture called *The Wheel and the Last Days*,⁸⁰ black people do not require weapons to fight against the government and the forces of oppression, they have the “power to make things happen if you come in tune with the Almighty,” just as he has. In other words, black bodies generally have power that is based

⁷⁹ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸⁰ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

on and driven by “spiritual” alignment with God. Put another way, this power comes to fruition through the symbolic congruence—that is the beliefs, faith, attitudes, and confidence—with the highest religious ideals of Farrakhan and the Nation.

The power of black bodies, then, is not simply to be understood as rooted in pure physicality, but in symbolic—which is to say, religious—realities. Aligned with and connected to divine ideals and bodies, African Americans have epistemological and creative mental and psychic power to create substantive realities in their own lives. In fact, the MP itself is a sign that African Americans, related to the (Japanese) creators and navigators of the Wheel, are a superior intelligence. Farrakhan notes that the “plane is a sign of that greater wisdom.”⁸¹ At the same time, the MP signals a revolutionary shift in Farrakhan’s theology in that he seems to eschew Elijah Muhammad’s traditional view that Master Fard was God in exchange for a more mystical New Age perspective. Instead, Fard was god-like, and he represents the same consciousness, power, and creativity that all African Americans can possess. Master Fard, he says, is “a great god. . .the Great Mahdi”⁸² but not the originator of all creation. Fard has only grown to God-type knowledge and power. Conversely, Farrakhan suggests that he has access to God directly, so he does not worship the Prophet Muhammad or Jesus. Rather, Black people are “joint heirs”⁸³ (I assume he means co-creators) with God, and once they come to the godlike self-consciousness, the same consciousness that Farrakhan himself is realizing. Farrakhan

⁸¹ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸² Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸³ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

contends, for instance, “black people don’t need God to make things happen if they come back to God”⁸⁴ because God wants to give them the power to “control the destiny of things on earth.”⁸⁵

The second aspect that we can infer from Farrakhan and the Mothership is that black bodies are the apex of divine attention and concern. Farrakhan notes that after his initial encounter with the MP, the Wheel continued to be present in his everyday life. He was able to feel and see its presence as he traveled throughout the world. For instance, in the subsequent international tour to Ghana, Ivory Coast, Libya and other countries, on which Farrakhan embarked after his initial experience with the MP, he reports that he saw the Wheel from his airplane as he traveled.⁸⁶ It is clear that this numinous experience was authoritative for him, but he suggests that it was not simply a phantom or a result of psychiatric pathology—others were presently aware of the Wheel and physical traces that it left.⁸⁷

He maintains, for instance, that the U.S. government detected the Mothership on radar,⁸⁸ in particular, the Wheel interfered with a U.S. aircraft carrier’s communications,

⁸⁴ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸⁵ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸⁶ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁸⁷ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*; See also, Koppel, *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*; Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*.

⁸⁸ In the lecture entitled *The Reality of the Mother Plane*, Farrakhan notes the “FAA said that they took note of this object on their radar screens.” Others have noted that UFOs

concluding: "Before you can call me a nut or call me crazy, these wheels will be seen all over America. . ."⁸⁹ Furthermore, a Japanese pilot "saw a strange light, small circular planes following his plane"⁹⁰ for four-hundred miles. The pilot, therefore, had the wheels in his view for "approximately fifty minutes. . . He noticed the silhouette of a very huge object. . . [that] appeared to be the size of two aircraft carriers."⁹¹ Farrakhan appeals to Elijah Muhammad's teachings and suggests that the Japanese pilot's observations of the size of the Wheel corresponds to Muhammad's declaration of the Wheel's size and that the smaller wheels that have been seen are what Muhammad suggested were the fifteen-hundred "little wheel-like planes"⁹² within the Mother Wheel that Muhammad mentioned. He retorts that Presidents Reagan, Ford, Carter, and all the presidents since 1930 (when Master Fard "arrived" in North America) have known that the Mothership

have left physical traces and have shown up on radar. Scientist, computer technology expert, and ufologist, Jacques Vallee has found this extremely significant in that it may signal a need to expand the boundaries of science in order to account for it. Cf. Danzler, *The Lure of the Edge*, 116; Jeffrey J. Kripal. "The Future of Technology of Folklore: Jacques Vallee and the UFO Phenomenon," in J. J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: Reading the Paranormal Reading Us* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸⁹ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁹⁰ Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*.

⁹¹ Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*.

⁹² Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*.

exists, but that they do not want to admit “that there is a power and technology in the world”⁹³ which renders Western technology inferior.

Not only is the Mothership constantly present, it is also protective of black bodies physically. Likewise, Farrakhan contends that the Wheel is poised and ready to exact retribution upon the government or anyone who harms him, even if the harm is accidental, “If I just get scratched accidentally by you, you will be destroyed completely.”⁹⁴ In one sense, Farrakhan sees himself as unique among black bodies.⁹⁵ As suggested earlier, derived from his mountain-top experience in Mexico, his role is Christ-like—soteriological and protective with respect to black people, soteriological and apocalyptic vis-à-vis America. His presence in the world is deferential in the sense that without it cataclysmic upheaval, via the Wheel, would ensue.⁹⁶ Farrakhan tells America, “I am here as a mercy to you or to end your civilization.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, the

⁹³ Farrakhan, *The Reality of the Mother Plane*.

⁹⁴ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁹⁵ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 219. Lieb argues that Farrakhan’s body represents all black people, which is not necessarily a contradiction. Farrakhan at once can see himself as a chosen leader and at the same time as represented what all bodies are and can become.

⁹⁶ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

⁹⁷ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*; Cf. Louis Farrakhan. *A Torchlight for America* (Chicago: FCN Publishing Co., 1993), 1-4. Farrakhan maintains that America is on her deathbed. Who is able to bring about a change in America to bring it from the brink of destruction? Farrakhan answers: the NOI and black people.

knowledge of the Wheel's the constant watchful protection should empower all black bodies to be boldly confrontational with the world physically and psychologically.

Third, the Mother Wheel signals that for Farrakhan the nature of black bodies is to be *out-of-place* symbolically and socially, and that, unlike Malcolm X, his predecessor Warith Deen Mohammed, and his mentor Elijah Muhammad, who all privilege one over the other, symbolic and social aspects of the body go hand in hand and are equally as radical. The tone and candor of Farrakhan's attitude and oratory castigations of America changed dramatically after his encounter with the Wheel and are an example of what all black bodies can be. This shift in the intensity of symbolic acts can be seen not only in his announcement and warning to the U.S. government that we explored earlier, it can be seen in many of his subsequent public addresses. The Mothership signals perpetual symbolic *out-of-placeness* for black bodies in America, which Farrakhan suggests with force. Michael Lieb, for instances, cites Farrakhan's *The Shock of the Hour* (1992) address in which the Minister proclaims: "We are a strange people in your midst. . . You look at us, but you do not know us. . . We are people of the Wheel. It protects us, it guides us, it stands as a constant reminder of our difference, our otherness."⁹⁸ Farrakhan

⁹⁸ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 219. It is also interesting to note that Compton, California rapper, who converted to the Nation in 1993, seemed influenced by the particular speech of Farrakhan. Notice the lyrics of MC Ren's song, *Shock of the Hour*, which not coincidentally takes the same name as the speech: "Now it license lights with million knights the divides and canyon. The shock of the hour has come to devour the evil, deceivers, and Satan. Among shin, among men, you wicked, whisperin' devil. Get deep in

proclaims that black bodies are distinct, mysterious, and that they have an intimate relationship with the plane—a symbolic and esoteric relationship that no other people share.

As further indication of symbolic *out-of-placeness*, Farrakhan's attitude and language vis-à-vis America became much more revealing with respect to how he viewed black people as being defined by something other than the racist social system. His cosmic consciousness that resulted from the UFO encounter implied a black bodily transcendence which, because he was in a sense so other-worldly, meant that he could engage the material world without fear of the racist backlash via sociopolitical public discourses or a fear of losing his life. His life and destiny were in the "hands" of Master

the flames of hell for the lies you babble. 6 6 6, the mark of the beast and the number of man. Is S, see yes you just confessed the antichrist is Caucasian. 'Cause you made from God and God is man, created on six. The art deceivers made believers outta my people and the crucifix. . . In the twinklin' of an eye, motherfuckers gonna die. Watchin' baby bomber planes rip across the sky. Fallin' on your Jesus, comin' for the pork chop Wake ya out your sleep, shit is deep, about to wreck shop. Bombs goin' down a mile deep, pushin' up a mile high." Notice the reference to the "baby bomber planes" which I believe is a reference to the 1500 planes or the small wheels that Muhammad and later Farrakhan suggest were inside of the Wheel. I read this as the judgment of the Mothership on America for its violent treatment of African Americans but also because of its false religious teachings. See, MC Ren, "Shock of the Hour," on *Shock of the Hour*, Ruthless Records, 1993.

Fard, the Great Mahdi and his Messenger Muhammad, who himself had taken on characteristics of divinity, having survived death and being a primary occupant of the MP. Consequently, the Minister's bold pronouncements illustrate his newly-acquired aggression that for him was a matter of ultimate religious and patriotic import. He proclaims:

Sexism is sinking the country. Classism is sinking the country. Racism is sinking the country. White supremacy is sinking the country. Black inferiority is sinking the country. . . . God has chosen from among the former slaves, the blacks. He has put in the head of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and in the heads of those of us who follow him, a light; a torchlight that shows the way out of America's worsening conditions, for blacks and for all America. But America's treatment of us and America's treatment of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is like the treatment of Daniel by the proud kings of Babylon. It's terrible that some of those with power and influence label me a Hitler, a racist or a hater, so that they can justify their own people, or agents among our people, in attempts to defame and otherwise harm me. This is hiding the light. This is scapegoating.⁹⁹

Farrakhan speaks as one who is uniquely called to cure the ills of America, suggesting that being a member of the most-oppressed class of people has had the reverse affect in the sense that God chose from such a class to raise one with a prophetic voice and insight that can save the sin-sick soul of the country, albeit the entire class of people are chosen.

⁹⁹ Farrakhan, *A Torchlight for America*, 25-6.

In a way, having been oppressed affords him a privileged religious position, albeit he does not seem to intend to valorize such suffering and violence which is part and parcel of oppression (not here at least). He connects the relationship of black people in America to the biblical figure Daniel and the officials of Babylon. But the Minister also reveals a patriotic commitment to America and a concern that it be the just country.

He offers his truth as a “torchlight” that can lead the country out of its present darkness into the light of day that is free from classism, racism, sexism, and white supremacy. Farrakhan says that America intentionally defames him in order to conceal the enlightenment he is offering and as a means to do continued violence to black people and to him. Moreover, Farrakhan signals that his new identity is cosmic and beyond human understanding, stating, “I am more than what you I think I am and I am more than what I thought I was...”¹⁰⁰ He is audacious in calling out Presidents Reagan and Bush in regard to their alleged plots to destroy black people,¹⁰¹ and his attitude reflects an intellectual and religious self-importance that is beyond that of any human intellect, governmental or otherwise. Like the argument here, Michael Lieb connects Farrakhan’s apocalyptic sermons about the government, whites, and Jews to the Wheel.¹⁰² This symbolic *out-of-placeness* is connected to social *out-of-placeness* in important ways.

That is, the Mothership brings forth social *out-of-placeness* in radical new ways in that the body as a symbol exchanges meanings with the physical body, *em-boldening* it.

¹⁰⁰ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

¹⁰¹ Farrakhan, *The Announcement*.

¹⁰² Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 218-9.

Given that social *out-of-placeness* entails the physical body crossing established boundaries of acceptable social activity, it is fueled and motivated by beliefs and attitudes of symbolic *out-of-placeness*, as described above, and vice versa. In this case, that Farrakhan opts to defy governmental orders in terms of his own political excursions and to confront the government bodily are a direct result of his being defined, not by the system, but by the Mothership. Two examples, among many others,¹⁰³ of such physical (social) *out-of-placeness* are relevant here as illustrations.

Soon after Farrakhan's vision of the MP, he embarked on an international journey that included nations that were on the U.S. list of terrorist nations to which American citizens were forbidden to travel. In January of 1996, the Minister commenced his

¹⁰³ Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 494-526. Walker cites numerous examples of Farrakhan's activism as well as greater implications for the Nation and African Americans claiming that they have a deepening influence among middle-eastern Arabs, American electoral politics, and that NOI leaders generally have had greater access to American seats of power. He cites, for instance, Farrakhan's southwestern regional representative Min. Robert Muhammad, who was invited to meet with former Texas Governor Anne Richards in 1992 in order to contribute to the "Governor's Citizen Action Task Force." He also suggests that many African American groups have responded with increased political vigor, including "black political classes," "black leftist and unionists," "black Christian churches," "women and feminists," and as well as Latinos in American and Latin America and Arabs—too many instances to enumerate here.

“World Friendship Tour” and traveled to Iraq, meeting with Saddam Hussein, Libya and Moammar Qaddafi, Iran, Sudan, and Syria.¹⁰⁴ Most upsetting to the government was the fact that Col. Qaddafi of Libya had offered to give the NOI one billion dollars to begin a bank, which would serve the cause of African American freedom,¹⁰⁵ and the State Department insisted that Farrakhan register henceforth as a foreign agent. As a form of insolence, Farrakhan and the NOI sought a license from the U.S. Treasury in order to receive the donated money. Allowing the NOI to receive the money, Farrakhan argued, would be “an act of expiation,”¹⁰⁶ a goodwill gesture to African Americans that America could make as recompense for its history of brutality and oppression. Needless to say, no evidence indicates that the NOI received the money,¹⁰⁷ but the very travel to these nations was an excellent illustration of black bodies socially *out-of-place* and the reaction of the government that considered Farrakhan a danger to its interests. Farrakhan even notes that it was Allah who made it possible for him to slip in and out of the country without being detected by government surveillance.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Koppell, *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*. Cf. Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*. Farrakhan claims that the MP followed him throughout his international excursion.

¹⁰⁵ Koppell, *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*.

¹⁰⁶ Koppel, *An Interview with Louis Farrakhan*.

¹⁰⁷ Farrakhan, *Torchlight for America*, 51. Farrakhan says that the U.S. government is angry with him because Libya lent the NOI the smaller amount of three million dollars without any collateral or interest.

¹⁰⁸ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

Another telling example of black bodies *out-of-place* that is a direct result of Farrakhan's encounter with the Mothership is his involvement with the "Navaho and Hopi Indians"¹⁰⁹ in the year subsequent to his vision. On July 6, 1986, the Minister made a commitment to these Native American communities when the government and the military sought to move them from their land, Farrakhan suggested. They needed him, he said, because "the U.S. government is a very murderous government."¹¹⁰ As a result, he, his wife Khadijah, Mother Tynetta Muhammad, and Jabril Muhammad (the same companions who were with him when he had his vision in Mexico on September 17, 1985) traveled to Arizona to participate in challenging officials who supposedly were at odds with the Native American communities.¹¹¹ Farrakhan reports that the four of them prayed in Arabic, and after the prayer, he maintains that "it came to me. Your prayer is

¹⁰⁹ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

¹¹⁰ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*. Note that this lecture occurred a week later. On July 13, 1986.

¹¹¹ At least one Navajo member, YoNasDa Lonewolf-McCall Muhammad, was also member of the NOI. See, "Louis Farrakhan. The Common Destiny of an Original People: Making a Productive Nation," http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_2808.shtml/ (Accessed October 11, 2008). This Final Call News article states that it reflects excerpts from Farrakhan's June 19, 1986 speech, but it is unclear when the article actually appeared.

answered,”¹¹² apparently that God was with them in their quest and was protecting and guiding them.

His comments about his presence in the government-Native American relocation controversy are revealing, “We were not to go in the fringe, we are to go right to the frontlines where death is. . . We are to go wherever death is to challenge death. . .because death has no power today over the force of life that is with us.”¹¹³ In the context of his July 13, 1986 lecture, *The Wheel and the Last Days*, it seems reasonable that this “force of life” to which Farrakhan refers is the Mothership, which sustains his life and empowers him to risk bodily harm, even “death,” to confront what he sees as injustice. Part of the larger goal in these events is to fulfill Muhammad’s contention that Native Americans are part of the Original “black” nation, and the Minister informs us that he was “born to bring about union between the black people and the red people.”¹¹⁴ In the end, he sees as his goal to unite two communities of people who were perhaps the most maligned in the history and development of America, a defiant act of symbolic and social *out-of-placeness* that may remind the country of its violent origins.

Conclusion

¹¹² Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

¹¹³ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

¹¹⁴ Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*; Cf. The Common Destiny of an Original People.

We have offered interpretive remarks regarding the ontology and psychology of the mothership experience earlier, so this section of the project will simply note that, as volatile as discussions of UFOs can be, Farrakhan's experience was nevertheless "real," in that it had concrete and numinous affects on his life. Suffice it to say here that this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the importance of the Wheel for understanding the meaning of black bodies in the Nation of Islam. This section argues that it is necessary to read the body in the context of the esoteric and mystical vision in Mexico and that the subsequent ministry of Louis Farrakhan changed dramatically in tone, intensity, and scope in response to the UFO episode.

Moreover, Farrakhan intimates that the vision of Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad in the MP is ultimately what gives his life and destiny coherence and comprehensibility, to the extent that previous events and visions, such as the 1955 experience that led him to commit fully to the Nation, come to fruition and find their meanings in that "technology of epistemology"¹¹⁵ known to the world as a UFO. I would add that Farrakhan ties the shining moment of his ministry, the Million Man March—when countless African American men assembled on the mall in Washington, D.C. on October 16, 1995—to inspiration from his experience on the Mothership, especially in his speech entitled *The Vision for the Million Man March*.¹¹⁶ Farrakhan also suggests the connection in the *Interview with Louis Farrakhan* that Ted Koppel conducted for the

¹¹⁵ See Chapter Three of this project in which I argue that the MP is a vehicle that discloses ultimate reality, a gnosis which heretofore had been hidden from the world.

¹¹⁶ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 201.

Nightline program in 1996. In fact, Lieb suggests that the Million Man March was one of several acts of “bearing witness”¹¹⁷ to the visionary encounter on the Mothership. Furthermore, the Million Man March address itself, “Toward a More Perfect Union,”¹¹⁸ is an enactment of his role as an oracle, the purveyor of esoteric truths in the form of numerology and symbolic parallels such as the Washington Monument as a Masonic symbol (i.e., Masonry as the origin of the NOI) and an African-Egyptian (i.e., the ancient classical African civilization) creation that is tied directly to the Wheel in theme and esoteric content.¹¹⁹ In other words, the hundreds of thousands of black [male] bodies gathered on the Mall that day were cosmically and mythologically connected (providentially, symbolically, numerologically) to the origins and truthfulness of the NOI that received concrete expression on September 17, 1985, when he Elijah Muhammad engaged him on the UFO.

This chapter also maintained that black bodies *out-of-place* symbolically and socially, as represented by Farrakhan, were enactments that are connected to the Wheel. It was no coincidence, then, that perhaps the two most poignant acts of *out-of-placeness*, the Million Man March and The Announcement, in which the symbolic and the social

¹¹⁷ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 199-201.

¹¹⁸ Farrakhan, *Let Us Make Man*, 127-50. See also, Haki R. Makhubuti and Maulana Karenga. eds. *Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology* (Chicago: Third World Press/Los Angeles: The University of Sankore Press, 1996), 9-29.

¹¹⁹ Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 201. Lieb also suggests that this speech was one of the acts of “bearing witness” to the MP.

could be seen concurrently and intertwined, took place in Washington, D.C., the seat of power in the U.S. Those two performances brought together the bodily sensibilities of his predecessors and mentors—Elijah Muhammad, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Malcolm X. In Farrakhan, we see both the profound religious and symbolic commitments that characterized his leader and Messenger, and the bodily (social) crossing of boundaries in a confrontational manner that his friend Malcolm desired so deeply to perform in his own life. These acts and others were empowered and compelled by Farrakhan's visionary encounter, without which his reconstitution of the Nation in 1977 and 1978 may have faded into relative obscurity. While this chapter did not spend extensive time explicitly enumerating which acts pointing to the importance of the physical body and which discourses (esp. Yacub) signified the importance of the body as a symbol of the collective, we have implied both by pointing out that he reinstituted all of the discourses and practices of Elijah Muhammad, including the eminence of the Fruit of Islam,¹²⁰ which Imam Warith Deen Mohammed had disbanded.

To that end, this chapter has implied that Minister Farrakhan embodied the ideals of all of his predecessors, including Imam Mohammed. Like, Mohammed, Farrakhan desired a much closer connection to the global community of Muslims—a longing, which strangely enough, was also tied to his vision of the Wheel via the Million Man March and many other acts and events. Farrakhan notes, for instance, that one of the two main reasons for holding the Million Man March was to link the NOI to Muslims of the world

¹²⁰ See, Louis Farrakhan. *The Meaning of the F.O.I.* (Chicago: The Honorable Elijah Muhammad Education Foundation, 1983).

and the second was to connect African Americans to Africans on the continent.¹²¹ This chapter has indicated other acts which parallel the practices and concerns of Imam Mohammed, such as the fact that Farrakhan, like Muhammad, jettisoned the term “temple,” or the place in which the NOI holds worship and meetings, in exchange for “mosque.” Another significant event, among several others, was that after his vision Farrakhan embarked on a goodwill international tour in which he visited almost exclusively Muslim nations such as Iran, Libya, Syria, Sudan, and Iraq.¹²² Even other

¹²¹ See Koppel, *Interview with Louis Farrakhan*.

¹²² I visited Mosque Maryam, the international headquarters for the NOI, in the summer of 2006, and I (my wife Rachel was with me) was admitted for a short tour. What was noteworthy here was that they have a room where they hold their Friday prayer (*jummah*), a practice of Muslims worldwide. On the ceiling in the *jummah* room were numerous phrases that were written in Arabic, the standardized language of Islam. In February 2007, I attended the NOI’s Saviour’s Day convention in Detroit, Michigan with Lawrence Mamiya. What was interesting, among other things, was that they held a large *jummah* service, that I attended, which was clearly international in terms of the people in attendance. The prayer service was led by an African American Sunni cleric. These are a few examples of the ways in which the NOI has incorporated the practices of “Islam” into their rituals. Recall also, that Farrakhan suggested that he and his small group of companions “prayed in the Arabic” when they were about to confront the government in support of the Native American communities. See Farrakhan, *The Wheel and the Last Days*.

countries on the tour which were not “Muslim” *per se*, such as Ghana, had large Muslim populations.

Again, what this chapter has suggested is the centrality and the eminence of the Mothership connection for an interpretation of the meaning of black bodies in Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam and for his ministry. Just what all the implications of this entail for all black bodies this chapter has tried to construct from Farrakhan’s often ambiguous significations of black bodies, the most important of which is an understanding of all black people as “Wheel people,” so that what is seen in his social and symbolic activity can be tied potentially to all black bodies.

Furthermore, attention to the Mothership should also be read as a critique of the overwhelming majority (almost all) of the published literature on Minister Farrakhan and the NOI, which has given little or no attention, least of all theoretical consideration, to his numerous discourses on the Wheel. Ted Koppel may well characterize the prevailing perspectives—both overt and through silence—of Farrakhan’s vision, which he called it “gibberish.”¹²³ To Farrakhan, it was no mere gibberish but a religious and ultimately significant event that defined, empowered, and guided his ministry from that very day until now. Farrakhan connects the eternal truths of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and Master Fard Muhammad to this event and suggests that the evidence is global and ancient. In other words, his collective responses to the issue of the Mothership imply that the history of ufology and UFO encounters is indeed the history of the

¹²³ Koppel, *Interview with Louis Farrakhan*.

Mothership, but only he and the NOI hold the key to understanding its meaning and what it means in terms of the identity of all black bodies on the planet.

The Mothership, as it was also called, defined all black bodies for Farrakhan and delineated the breadth of his own activity for which and to which the Mothership gave meaning. Because the Wheel was transcendent in its meaning and immanent in its direct implications, it reflected a cosmology that regarded the transcendent and immanent aspects of the world as ultimate and as the objects of religious concern—bringing the religious, the everyday, and the political together. The Mother Wheel, as a (indeed *THE*) carrier of the meaning of black bodies, denoted as such that these bodies were divine in their physicality (social) and their cosmic transcendence (symbolic). This may help to explain why, despite ideological pressure from Sunni and other Muslims and media scrutiny of UFOs and Farrakhan, the institutional ideals and doctrines remained durable. This commitment to social and symbolic *out-of-placeness* may help to elucidate why Farrakhan and the NOI (i.e., black bodies in the NOI) have been perceived so harshly as subversive and *dangerous*, to which certain segments of the public have responded violently,¹²⁴ and why their own institutional,¹²⁵ cosmological commitments may have

¹²⁴ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 115; cf. New York Times (October 7, 1985, II), 4. For example New York Mayor Koch and Governor Cuomo both denounced Farrakhan, and the Jewish Defense League held a “Death to Farrakhan” rally in New York, in response to a Farrakhan speech delivered in the city. It is interesting to note that Farrakhan tied a UFO sighting in Tucson, Arizona on the morning of his Madison Square Garden address,

impeded them from perceiving any “truths” in Farrakhan’s social critique of American racism, and the difficulty with ascribing epistemological authority to black bodies.¹²⁶

to persecution by whites and white Jewish groups. In other words, the Mothership was protecting him and revealing itself as a sign of Farrakhan’s religious authority.

¹²⁵ Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986) 3-4. Again, according to Douglas, such oppositional commitments may prevent certain forms of thought and exert a tremendous influence on cognition, rendering it difficult at best for those ensconced in dominant institutions to hear the other as legitimate.

¹²⁶ See, Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell. “Voiced Bodies/Embodied Voices.” In *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference, and Interplay*, edited by Naomi Zack, 192 (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). Bradford and Sartwell maintain that “. . . the voices of those who would protest their consignment to a social identity can be delegitimated in advance by the expectation on the part of authoritative listeners that those bodies do not count.”

Chapter Seven

Reforming the Black Body as the Central Concern in the Nation of Islam: Coherence, Contradictions, and Conflicts

Chapter One of this project suggested that the NOI was responding to a particular type of black body that was constructed through Western philosophical discourses as well as slavery and lynchings. This body was negatively racialized, and the NOI sought to reform the physical body and the body as a social symbol. The chapter utilized Mary Douglas's theory of "dirt" to give theoretical coherence to how and why black bodies were treated violently in society, by the dominant culture. Douglas' theory tries to ascertain the reason for the ubiquitous concerns for purity in various cultures. She suggests that "dirt" is a symbolic category that refers to "matter out of place" in taxonomies that order social systems to make them intelligible. Subsequently, the project proposes the theory, black bodies *in-and-out-of-place*, and argues that the black bodies that were negated and constructed as grotesque were considered no threat to the social order. These were black bodies *in-place*. In response, the NOI, in the four historical moments represented by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan, constructed bodies that were *out-of-place* socially and symbolically, and therefore were perceived to be a threat to the social system and dangerous. Finally, the chapter traces the history of the NOI and points to significant moments that indicate concerns for the body.

Chapter Two explores Elijah Muhammad's critique of black bodies *in-place*. These are bodies that, for him, had been "whitenized" ideologically by Christianity. The

Nation considered these bodies deplorable and viewed them as functioning in service of white domination of black communities, in that they internalized and promulgated the slave master's religion, Christianity—a religion that was used to enslave African Americans and keep them *in-place*.

Chapter Three explored Elijah Muhammad's creative project in which he used certain rituals such as the dress codes and dietary codes and discourses such as the narrative of Yacub to construct ideal black bodies which would have the benefit of practices that could make them physically vibrant and theologies and mythologies that could give them new meaning beyond earthly sociopolitical and historical space. The chapter argued, however, that Muhammad privileged the symbolic over the social (i.e., the physical body). As a religious leader, he was not concerned with physically engaging an unjust and oppressive social system but rather with making religious disciples, who lived separately, so to speak, given that they believed that they had a unique hold on truth.

Chapter Four examines Malcolm X and his thought and practices that have relevance for black bodies. The chapter argues that Malcolm reversed or inverted Elijah Muhammad's paradigm, in that Malcolm gave greater importance to black bodies *out-of-place* socially. By this, he desired for black bodies to engage oppressive social systems physically, to participate in Civil Rights activities and to provide for the self-defense of black communities. As a matter of fact, Malcolm questioned and critiqued his mentor's commitment to and privileging of symbolic *out-of-placeness*, which meant that they were largely irrelevant and distant from the sociopolitical activities that affected African Americans. This subtle rejection of Muhammad's millenarianism and the expansion of

Malcolm's own understanding of his community (i.e., not just the NOI but African American Christians, other ethnicities, and black women tenuously) occurred before his much-lauded hajj to Mecca, contrary to popular conceptions.

Chapter Five focused on Warith Deen Mohammed during the time in which he took over the leadership of the NOI and in the subsequent years of the 1980s. The chapter argues that Mohammed raised the importance of both the social and the symbolic but that he executed them in "Islamic" form, that is, what he understood to be an appropriate Sunni Islam that was particularized for African Americans special condition and history in America. In the early years, Mohammed contended, this put him at odds with Arab and immigrant Muslims, and he was also critical of America as he sought to re-define the meaning of black bodies via conversations on race. That is, he spends a great deal of time and energy talking about race because he was attempting to affect the meaning of black bodies as symbols. He sought to dislodge their meanings from the racist social system that had defined them historically.

Chapter Six interpreted Louis Farrakhan's ministry and his notion of black bodies in light of his UFO experience—that is, the vision that he had of being taken into the Mothership in which he reports encountering Master Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad. The chapter argues that in order to understand the nature of black bodies in Farrakhan's NOI, it is necessary to view them in relationship to the Mothership, which gives them their meaning. Furthermore, for Farrakhan, social and symbolic *out-of-placeness* are both equally important and equally radical, and the acts that illustrate them are explicitly tied to his UFO experience. Finally, Farrakhan is the culmination of

Muslim ideals as he embodies the practices and discourses of his predecessors Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Warith Deen Mohammed.

Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, will bring coherence to the entire project by making several interpretive claims that may help to explain the nature of the body in the NOI and the reasons why the body was the central concern in each of the four critical moments of interest to this study. Furthermore, the chapter will explore Elijah Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy and suggest that versions of it permeate the NOI's conception of the body in all of the moments in question. Where black bodies vary throughout the history of the NOI, we suggest here, the differences can be attributed to changing conceptions of cosmology and corresponding social organization.¹ To that end, reformation of black bodies can be understood against a problematic confluence of race and class (i.e., reforming the lower-class *habitus*), in which the NOI learned to navigate the boundaries of the former but not the latter in that they reproduced a class system within the NOI.

Elijah Muhammad's Ideal Black Bodily Economy in the Life of the Nation of Islam: Class Consciousness and the Aesthetics of Mythology

¹ In Chapter One I argued for the correspondence between bodies, social organizations, and cosmologies, and that in order to understand the nature of the body in a given instance, one has to consider the type of social institution in which it is constructed and the world views that inform it.

This project has maintained, explicitly at times and implied throughout the chapters by allusion, that Muhammad's black bodily economy was in operation in all of the four moments of the NOI and that it functioned, as institutional values,² to influence the nature of who was prominent within the organization, particularly, with respect to its leaders. In other words, the chapters signaled when and where elements of Muhammad's bodily matrix appeared and sometimes commented expressly indicating such. At other times, the

² Mary Douglas. *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 3-4, 48-53, 112, 119; Ernest Gellner. "Sanctity, Puritanism, Secularism and Nationalism in North Africa: A Case Study," in *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology: Mediterranean Rural Communities and Social Change*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Paris/The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1963), 31-48. Mary Douglas's theory of institutions argues that social organizations (or institutions) exert a certain amount of control over cognition—and Ernest Gellner follows the same line of reasoning—that institutions limit and restrict some forms of individual thought, that is, ideas which do not support the values and maintenance of the institution. These institutions, that is, self-policing conventions and thought-worlds, are legitimated, Douglas contends, through naturalizing principles that are ultimately located in the body as an analogy. For Douglas, this notion can be viewed as an extension of her conversation regarding the "grid" or the system of shared classifications as a form of social control. This is often why "majority rules." See, for instance, Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 57-71.

project simply documented the presence of the constituent categories. Muhammad's economy is given its full expression in Chapter Three. The Chapter contends that the aesthetics of ultimacy, that is, which bodies most approximated Muhammad's ideal black religious body, were grounded in the Nation's mythology of Yakub (Chapter Two) and God's own body, which was also mythicized in the saga of Yakub.

We extend this claim here by attempting to map and document the decisive presence of his bodily economy in the Nation but also to translate its activity into terms of class consciousness, which resulted in the reproduction of an ambiguous class system within the NOI that functioned primarily through advanced processes of marginalization. That is to say, the NOI, through its mythology and hence its theology and rituals, *re-*produced a system similar to the classifications and restrictions of white supremacy against which they were reacting in their attempts to reform the lower class *habitus*³ that was tied to violent practices of racialization and discourses of black inferiority.⁴

³ See, Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17, 72, 81-2, 87. In Chapter One, we defined habitus as a set of dispositions, tastes, and habits that become second nature and seemingly unconscious. These dispositions are always "classed" given that they are intended to benefit the guarantors of a society and ensure the reproduction of the society. Again, *habitus* become embodied through *bodily hexus*, a complex of modalities of motor functions, language, styles of speech, facial expressions, postures, behaviors, and so on that are inculcated and appropriated through imitation.

This project has used Douglas's notion of "dirt"⁵ to give theoretical coherence to the ways in which black bodies were/are treated in American society. Since the theory has been outlined in detail, it will not be reiterated here. Suffice it to say, that the NOI created a system that rendered bodies *in-place* and *out-of-place*, similar to the pernicious methods found in America's system of white supremacy. In this case, however, particular black bodies were seen as *in-place* and *out-of-place*. The line of reasoning at this point will be that bodies were constructed according to its own cosmology as found in the mythology of Yakub and that this mythology ordered bodies and social relations within the nation, with respect to religion, gender, sexuality, class, color, and so on. To this end, bodies that approximated Muhammad's ideal bodily economy were viewed as *in-place*.

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*

(London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 44, 49; 119-20. Douglas' theory of "dirt," as I summarized in Chapter One attempts to explain the ubiquitous concern for "cleanliness" and purity. She argues, in short, that all cultures develop taxonomies that make the world intelligible and that what then violates their classificatory system are things which do not fit neatly into a typology, are ambiguous, transitional, or marginal, and hence are seen as dangerous, contaminating, or polluting. In other words, what is dangerous is "matter out of place." Such order points to a cosmology or way in which the world is conceived and organized. I used her notion of dirt because it offers me a theoretical framework by which to apprehend the reasons for symbolic and actual violence to which black bodies have been subjected in America.

As opposed to black bodies that were viewed as *in-place* in an American social context, which the NOI viewed as grotesque and in need of redemption, NOI bodies *in-place* were pulchritudinous and imbued by Muhammad and the Nation with religious authority. Bodies that were seen in conflict with the ideal or rather did not approximate it closely enough (*out-of-place*) were marginalized. The meaning of “*place*,” then, was inverted in the Nation in that *out-of-placeness* carried negative meaning within the group, whereas *in-placeness* indicated a high level of coherence and contact with factors that gave one importance for Muhammad.

This reproduction of inequality is analogous to other strategies that have been employed by middle-class black people by means of a primary function of religious ideology. For example, Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham claims in her book, *Righteous Discontent*, that many black women in Baptist churches employed what she calls a “politics of respectability,”⁶ interpreted as a strategy to counter the white supremacist normative depictions of black people in general as inferior, immoral, and uncouth. This notion of a politics of respectability is related to the theory or cult of domesticity, developed by black men, in this case, given that such strategies functioned both as tools to police women’s bodies but also to mark particular bodies as having a middle-class status (i.e., “Victorian”). Furthermore, “domestic” space functioned as a marker that

⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 185-230.

allowed for policing of bodies through excessive ordering or tidying.⁷ As a result, African Americans invariably altered and monitored their own bodies and behaviors so that they conformed to what they believed whites would deem respectable, and, at the same time, they policed and sanitized the bodies and practices of lower class African Americans through morality discourses.⁸ Moreover, Bourdieu suggests (see Chapter One) that the taken-for-granted systems of classification and belief that appear self-evident (*doxa*) are legitimated by the lower class masses via *symbolic violence*, since they are offered by the rulers or gate keepers of a society as natural, and he maintains that the lower classes acquiesce to the social order—its values, perceptions, and categories of thought imposed upon them, as desirable. *Symbolic violence* obfuscates power relations and allows potentially for perpetuation and reproduction of the order by way of the *habitus*.⁹

⁷ See, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 167-8.

⁸ See, for instance, Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, 1967), 15, 33, 70. This is especially true for Elijah Muhammad, who, under the guise of "slave foods," euphemistically criticized the eating habits of poor black people and connected their dietary habits to immorality, laziness, immodesty, and lower intelligence.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 171-82, 190-7; cf. 161: "Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness. Of all the mechanisms tending to produce this effect, the most important and the best concealed is undoubtedly the

The implications of this for the NOI bodily project are that, while the counter-hegemonic discourses and subversive practices that *re*-constructed black bodies may have been well intentioned and partially successful reformative ventures, they may also be susceptible to the same dynamics of social reproduction, centered on and in bodies, that produced racialized and classed hierarchical modalities in the larger culture. Indeed, it is strategies such as these, whose primary intent may be subversive to the dominant order, that invariably re-produce and re-create the very inequality they seek to ameliorate and destabilize.¹⁰

dialectic of the objective chances and the agents' aspirations, out of which arises the *sense of limits*, commonly called *sense of reality*. . . Systems of classification which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e., the divisions by sex, age, or position in the relations of production, make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product, by securing misrecognition, and hence the recognition of the arbitrariness on which they are based. . . [so that] the natural and social world appears self-evident. This experience we shall call *doxa*."

¹⁰ E.g., Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-called Negroes's Problem*, Vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 2006) 33-4; Elijah Muhammad. *The Supreme Wisdom*, Vol. 2 (Atlanta, GA: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 2006), 16; Cf. Chapter Two. As Chapter Two pointed out, these practices and counter-discourses were only moderately successful, in that some of the negative ideas about black bodies that the NOI deplored was reproduce and

The inevitability of such reproduction of inequity is due to several factors: 1) *Habitus* are classed (and gendered). Given that the guarantors of given societies tend to be male and socially privileged, the *embodied* dispositions that mark the bodies of the lower class masses also reflect their function, which is the maintenance and reproduction of class stratification.¹¹ 2) In the absence of sufficient socio-cultural complexity that would enable the recognition of such by the lower classes, relative homogeneity¹² such as found in the NOI, which seeks to constrain and control every aspect of the activities of its members, limits the cognition of its members and hence the potential for disruption of social replication.¹³ 3) Moreover, misrecognition by the lower classes of the arbitrariness of the principles that serve to legitimate class domination and hence the concealment of

deployed in their own narratives. For example, the story of Yacub explained African physical features, including “kinky hair,” as resulting from the corruption of original black phenotype when an early dissatisfied God-Scientist in East Asia (i.e., the Nile Valley and Mecca) suggested that members of the Tribe of Shabazz or the original black people go into the “jungle” in order to live there and prove that they could conquer wild beasts. Accordingly, this experience would harden black people and make them able to endure the vicissitudes of life.¹⁰ The aesthetic effect was the appearance of modern black features like full lips, wide noses, and tightly-curled hair.

¹¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 80-3.

¹² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 80.

¹³ Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 48-9. Douglas argues that individual cognition is limited by institutions.

class stratification and reproduction is attained through *symbolic violence*,¹⁴ so that the masses come to see the order as given and natural—even desirable. The principles that are used to “naturalize”¹⁵ the social order are generally located by analogy in the body.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 171-82, 190-7.

¹⁵ Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 48-9. “. . .the incipient institution needs some stabilizing principle to stop its premature demise. That stabilizing principle is the naturalization of social classifications. There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere as long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set [*sic*] social relations to another form and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validating truth... The institutions lock into the structure of an analogy from the body.”

¹⁶ Stephen C. Finley and Margarita L. Simon, “‘That Girl Is Poison’: White Supremacy, Anxiety, and the Conflation of Women and Food in the Nation of Islam,” in *Women and Religion in the World*, vol. 7, ed. Darnise T. Martin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Forthcoming). For example, Elijah Muhammad, Finley and Simon argued, appealed to both agriculture metaphors and the physical body to stabilize and legitimate social relations between men and women in the NOI and to validate male dominance, when he suggests that women are a “man’s field to produce his nation.” That is to say, biology and “nature” would indicate that men are active and aggressive and that women are the passive recipients of male activity and desire, and as “fields” are his to

4) Such social replication and reproduction via the experience of the violence and discourses of oppression is deeply sedimented in the bodies and psyches of African Americans and other oppressed communities, making it challenging, though not impossible, to curtail replication.

Moreover, the employment of such strategies as found in the NOI ultimately hierarchicalizes and orders bodies according to what Judith Butler calls “Bodies that Matter”¹⁷—the structuring, normalizing, and policing the bodily *habitus* of the marginal. Such strategies, as exemplified in the religious dimensions of the NOI, can often take place in practices such as rituals, diets, and clothing styles, among other forms of representation, which ultimately seek to structure the body according to a rigid, inflexible, and normalizing economy. Given that such daunting dynamics do not totalize recalcitrant black bodies, which resist being absolutely defined and overdetermined by the social system, disruption of such social duplication of bodies is possible through: 1)

traverse and manage. Also clear in Douglas’s (and Bourdieu’s) hypothesis of institutions is that social organizations, bodies, and views of the world or cosmologies are intertwined, so that conceptions of bodies (indeed thinking about the body), in this case, may vary as the structure of organizations and cosmologies fluctuate. We have suggested above that such interactive variance in the primary factors, i.e., institutions, cosmologies, while complicated, may be sufficient to explain the differences in the ways in which the body was conceived in the four critical moments.

¹⁷ Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).

changing the field of relations or practice (which Muhammad changed from social to religious). A *field* is a system of social positions which are arranged in power relationships. Changing the field creates new forms of capital and modalities of meaning. In this case, being religious, or the social position of “Messenger” for example, offers a new economy that is potentially capable of subverting racist and hierarchical modalities in social arenas.¹⁸

In addition, 2) disruption requires being reflexive and acutely attentive to the ways in which an experience of hegemonic white supremacy may have affected the manner that oppressed people see themselves (i.e., the extent to which they have internalized white supremacy). This also means paying attention to the ways in which power has been and is used in forms of domination.¹⁹ 3) It necessitates the deployment of

¹⁸ Fields are constructed based upon classificatory systems that I am linking to cosmologies, out of which worlds are created.

¹⁹ Albert B. Cleage, Jr. *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, 1987), 102-3. Cleage demonstrates this type of reflexivity in his quest to build a Black Christian Nation when he speaks of power in the context of how white people have used it and, being no different from whites ontologically, black people must use it: “Under the same circumstances the Black man *will* act the same way. Some day the circumstances will be the same unless we create a community in which Black people can establish a different value system. The Black Nation is important because we do not want to become

counter-discourses, values, and practices that resist socially reproducing white supremacy as a form of oppression but that also defend against responses to racism that conceal themselves in other co-constitutive forms of oppression such as sexism and heterosexism. While the NOI successfully accomplished number 1, they failed to employ numbers 2 and 3.

To the contrary, the naturalizing,²⁰ normalizing, and ordering of the body, both physical and symbolically, we find in what I call Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy—an amalgamation of characteristics and factors, mined from the Muhammad's speeches, mythology, theology, and rituals—that make up what it means to be an sublime black religious body in the Nation of Islam. Chapter Three enumerated this economy as Muslim, male, masculine, healthy, adult, “middle-class,” heterosexual, mystical-esoteric, light complexioned, and intelligent/“gifted.” What gets effectively eschewed and marginalized, the Chapter contended, is a body constituted by any combination of features from the default black bodily economy, which can be seen as: Christian, female,

the “beast” that the white man has become. We want to secure power within a communal framework that will enable us to preserve our humanity.”

²⁰ Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164. The legitimation and reproduction of the system of classification and institution is dependent upon the efficacy of such concealment through misrecognition, and again, the relation between the “natural” and the social has to appear “self-evident” and “taken for granted.”²⁰ In other words, the cosmology, the order of things, has to be ostensibly grounded phenomenologically in the natural appearance of things.

effeminate male, “homosexual,” dark complexioned, political/”integrationist,” working class/poor, disabled, and so on. The categories of sublimity can be aggregated and represented generally as religion, color/complexion, class, and gender and sexuality, and as such, these factors were expressed in the life of the Nation as forms of intra-race and intra-religious class consciousness, and further, that they distinguished NOI hierarchically and qualitatively from other black bodies.

Religion

Religion²¹ is the most self-evident of the categories given that, in the literature, discourses, and practices of the Nation, ideal black bodies are “Muslim.” What this means varies, as demonstrated in the four moments, but for Muhammad and Malcolm X, at least (as well as Mohammed and Farrakhan earlier in their careers), Muslim is ontological. It is not something to which black people convert. Rather, Muslim is their nature, and it implies both “black” and “righteous,” as expressed in the Narrative of Yakub (Chapter Two). The nomenclature “Muslim,” while varying in meaning and deployment, continued to be a defining feature of ideal black bodies for Malcolm X,

²¹ Anthony B. Pinn. *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 173. Here, I will follow Pinn’s definition of religion as a “quest for complex subjectivity,” which he understands as a desire or push for more life fullness, to find significance and meaning over a variety of indicators (not simply race, for example), in ways that subvert racist and sexist depictions of African Americans as inferior.

Mohammed, and Farrakhan—the complexity and diversity of which has already been rehearsed in the previous chapters.

The privileging of “Islam” as well as periodic overt oppositions to Christianity follow logically as black bodies are constructed through multiple processes of islamization²² in which bodies gain their meaning through ritualization and religious discourses. Whatever form they take, the processes are called “Islam,” and the resulting bodies are deemed “Muslim.” The structured manner in which this ritualizing takes place is more of a concern for “what” these black bodies are able to be “named” rather than giving attention to its complexity. It does not imply a linear shift from an existential understanding of what “Muslim” means to an ontological one. Rather, it is a messy process. “Islam” may speak more to the sources of the process, while “Muslim,” is the result or the goal. They may, however, be attempting to “fix” the meaning of such bodies as responses to discourses from outside of African American and Muslim communities. As such religion in the NOI can be viewed as a restricting belonging, in the sense that this ritualizing also constrains members of the Nation.

That is, while the project of the NOI has been to reconstruct black bodies vis-à-vis white supremacy, it has also constricted their meaning and activity in ways that mirror some of the oppressive forms of racism and sexism that African Americans experienced in the U.S. For Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Mohammed, these were essentialized

²² See also, Edward E. Curtis, IV. “Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12.2 (2002): 167-96.

identities in the sense that Muslim was not a historically grounded and socially constructed identity, but a natural one, and also that Islam—whether it be the forms found in the NOI or those of Sunni Islam²³—held a superior and exclusive status regarding its veracity vis-à-vis other religious traditions. Mohammed skillfully attempts to avoid an obvious claim that Islam is the natural religion of the black race,²⁴ but he invariably subverts his own claim, contaminates it, through his conflation of African American history with the transcendent figure of Bilal ibn-Rabah, an early convert to Islam and a close friend to the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵ And his reference to African Americans as “Bilalians”²⁶ indicates his desire to impose this identity on all black people in America

²³ The two “forms” are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

²⁴ W. Deen Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY* (Chicago: W. D. Muhammad Publications, 1984), 35. He does come close to making the claim that Islam is the natural black religion by suggesting that all of the West African nations from which African American ancestors were taken were Muslim nations. Hence, African American via their ancestors were originally Muslim.

²⁵ Muhammad Abdul-Rauf. *Bilāl Ibn Rabāh: A Leading Companion of the Prophet Muhammad* (n.p.: American Trust Publications, 1977); H. A. R. Craig. *Bilal* (London: Quartet Books, 1977).

²⁶ For example, Wallace Deen Muhammad. *As the Light Shineth From the East* (Chicago: WDM Publishing Co., 1980), 97.

and to ontologize its connotation.²⁷ For Mohammed, Bilalians referred to all African Americans (see Chapter Five) and as such, his desire was to essentialize black identity with Bilal as natural, but he masks this idea by suggesting that for black people culturally Bilal was worthy of celebration and imitation.²⁸

Along those same lines, it would seem appropriate to characterize Farrakhan's views on Islam and what it means to be a Muslim as characterizing the ideal black body, despite language that may seem more ecumenical and open ended. Defining black bodies ultimately via the Mothership, which bears witness to the truthfulness of the religion of Elijah Muhammad, again, would seem to indicate that such bodies are Muslim. Furthermore, Farrakhan's Muslim black body would represent the exemplar of what all black bodies could be, given his personal and prototypical encounter with the Wheel. In the end, that the ideal body is "Muslim" is convoluted by the conflation of its meaning with race (i.e., "black") and with issues of color and complexion, which play an essential role in how ideal bodies, indeed significant bodies, are constituted in the critical moments of the Nation. What this means is that as a Muslim Farrakhan is also a symbol for all black bodies but that this symbol becomes problematic given that if his body is exemplar

²⁷ See, Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, vol. 2, 114-5, where he clearly essentializes African American identity referring to "something special in our make up, in our needs that differs from that of other people."

²⁸ "Imitation" meaning in the sense that he thought African Americans *should all* be Muslim.

for everyone, how does one supposed appropriate the issues of gender, since he is a man, and complexion, given his lightness?

Color/Complexion

This research has attempted to highlight in various places throughout the pages of this project that “color” or complexion played an important role within the NOI. What I mean to indicate is the manner in which the skin complexion (i.e., the range of lightness and darkness), among persons of the African Diaspora, participated in determining who was qualified for leadership and in my assessment of which bodies more closely approximated Muhammad’s ideal, as possible explanation for the ways in which “class” was constructed in the organization. What some have called the “color complex”²⁹ or colorism³⁰ among African Americans refers to black “intraracial color discrimination,”³¹ or stated another way, it is “a psychological fixation about color and features that leads

²⁹ See, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993). While helpful, one of the problems that I have with the approach of the book is that it utilizes the virulent binary “light-skinned” and “dark-skinned” in their own discourses rather than dislodging and subverting it. Rather, they point out how these terms functioned in discriminatory activities in black communities.

³⁰ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 4. Here the color complex and colorism are used synonymously.

³¹ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 1.

Blacks to discriminate against each other.”³² The authors of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, contend that:

. . .beneath the surface appearance [of black intraracial social relations]³³ of Black solidarity lies a matrix of attitudes about skin color and features in which color, not character, establishes friendships; degree of lightness, not expertise, influences hiring; and complexion, not talent, dictates casting for television and film.³⁴

Traditionally, the color complex has led lighter complexioned African Americans to discriminate against darker persons, according to the authors, but they point out that the bias operates in the opposite direction at times, for example, in decisions about who is “black” enough and who is not.³⁵ Furthermore, colorism can be seen as the internalization and deployment of the racialized values of internal colonialism and slavery in which those who were lighter were seen as more closely biologically related to the oppressors and therefore more valued—considered more intelligent and cultured, while those who were darker were viewed as more criminal and savage.³⁶

³² Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 2.

³³ Emphasis is mine.

³⁴ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 1.

³⁵ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 2. Cf. Discourses re Barak Obama.

³⁶ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 5.

We have already demonstrated that this type of thinking and discourse operated within the Nation (See Chapter Two & Three) but should reiterate here what is at stake. That is, the color complex undoubtedly functioned within the NOI and participated in the construction of class status vis-à-vis Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy, but what I am arguing here is that such socially constructed colorism played a secondary but confounding role in the color consciousness of within the discourses of the Nation. In other words, this bodily economy was the most determinative of class, and the extant class issues that operated throughout African American communities were secondary. What is confounding is that they operated simultaneously and with one another.

What was primary, in these moments of the Nation, was a legacy of the aesthetics of mythology that located ideal blackness in the "black" body of God, Master Fard Muhammad, whose "Caucasoid" physiognomy was imbued with mythological and authoritative meaning perhaps in part because he appeared "white."³⁷ Furthermore, as the paradigmatic black body, colorism (as well as gender, sexuality, and class) became sacralized and fixed in NOI cosmology and mythology of Yakub (Chapter Two), and as the sacred narrative, the characteristics of the ideal economy become fixed as superior (hence the "class" status), given that they are located in God's "*black*" body.

³⁷ Karl Evanzz. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 204. For instance, an article written by Mohammed Yakub Khan, in a black newspaper called the Chicago New Crusader characterized the NOI as worshipping a white man (i.e., Master Fard). See also, *Message to the Blackman*, 19.

As a significant aspect of Muhammad's ideal economy, this light-complexioned mythico-sacred embodiment became the archetypal black body that influenced the succession of leadership in the historical moments of the Nation. We have already seen (in Chapter Two) how Elijah Muhammad, as God's Messenger, described his own lineage as one who was the descendant of a grandmother whose father was a white slave master as well as many other ancestors, who were described as "mulatto," "fair skinned," or "light in complexion."³⁸ In fact, Nigerian historian E. U. Essien-Udom, who composed his dissertation on his ethnographic study of the Nation within social theory, characterized Muhammad's own complexion as "light,"³⁹ meaning that with respect to the putative color binary he would have been seen as being on the "privileged" side.

This colorism could have, in fact, influenced Muhammad's decision to make Malcolm a minister and to hasten his progression through the ranks to a position of eminence. Malcolm was acutely aware of the ways in which complexion functioned in black communities and in the relationship between this dynamic and the violent

³⁸ Claude Andrew Clegg, III. *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 5. Cf. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 6-7, who argue that "mulatto" is a derogatory term that referred to a hybrid cross between a thoroughbred horse and a donkey and insist that the two corresponded in metaphorical racial discourse to white people and black people, respectively.

³⁹ E. U. Essien-Udom. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 75.

miscegenation of slavery.⁴⁰ In any case, he was also sensitive to the ways in which his lightness gave him privilege, even in his own family.⁴¹ And while conjecture, strong circumstantial evidence presented throughout this work suggests the possible influence colorism rooted in Master Fard's body that may have played a role in Malcolm's popularity. In fact, he locates his calling to ministry in his prison "visitation" by Master Fard, whom he describes as not being "black, and he wasn't white. He was light brown-skinned, an Asiatic cast of countenance, and he had oily hair. . . ."⁴² Clearly, lightness as a characteristic of Muhammad's economy seemed to act upon Malcolm to one extent or another, as did the color complex as an internal process of his own consciousness. When it came to conversations within the Nation about succession to the post of National Spokesman after Malcolm broke with the NOI, the gifted orator Larry 4X Prescott was viewed as having rhetorical gifts that rivaled Malcolm's. Yet, he was thought to be "too dark-skinned" than the "lighter-skinned" Malcolm or Farrakhan to attract new members.⁴³ Such a conversation may reveal part of Malcolm's appeal.

Colorism in the life and ministry of Warith Deen Mohammed is much more ambiguous. It is unclear how color functioned for him, but one can conjecture that, having been Muhammad's son and born into the Nation of Islam in 1933, he may have

⁴⁰ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 122-6, 282, esp. 206.

⁴¹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 4.

⁴² Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 190.

⁴³ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 288.

inherited some of the same sensibilities about shades of blackness. What is clear is that he was conscious of the ways in which the color complex functioned within the Nation. For example, Mohammed was emphatic in his contention that the major reason why African Americans accepted Master Fard Muhammad as authoritative and indeed as God was that he looked white.⁴⁴ He claims to have been suspicious of Fard Muhammad's image, stating, "As I grew as a young man, and I got in my teens—at fifteen, sixteen—I started to wonder why this man looking so white was supposed to be black and a black god."⁴⁵ Again, that the "black" God appeared white may have made his image a potent motivation for constructing classes based on color and for selecting leadership.

The evidence indicates that colorism was acute as a factor in Louis Farrakhan's rise to power within the Nation. His light appearance was said to be a motivating factor in Muhammad's elevation of him to National Spokesman after Malcolm's departure from the NOI.⁴⁶ In spite of that, he was critical of colorism, and he blamed whites for it, even though he seemed to benefit from the complex in terms of his upward mobility in the organization. Nevertheless, he contends, colorism was a machination of whites to divide African Americans. In a speech delivered on November 2, 1970 for Black Solidarity Day in New York City, for instance, he contends that "The white man pumped his blood into

⁴⁴ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 27, 206-7; Muhammad, *W. Deen Muhammad Speaks from Harlem, NY*, vol. 2, 29.

⁴⁵ Steven Barboza. *American Jihad: Islam After Malcolm X* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 100.

⁴⁶ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 288.

our women. He had access to her during slavery. And he made all of these different colors. And then he made the lighter one to think that he was better than the darker one.”⁴⁷ So, he declares, the origin of colorism was via miscegenation in slavery, but it was purposeful in that the slave master could then divide his offspring from the darker slaves. This is the origin of the color divisions of today, according to him. The color complex is powerfully influential in black communities so that, located in Master Fard’s body or not, it is a perennial problem that continues to plague African Americans.⁴⁸ Located in sacred flesh and fixed via mythology, however, it becomes insurmountable and inevitably reproduced in the religious system.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Minister Louis Farrakhan. *7 Speeches* (Chicago: The Final Call, Inc., 1992), 114.

⁴⁸ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 24-40. The writers argue and illustrate that pervasive influence of color in black communities in education, leadership, business, and power.

⁴⁹ I have suggested that two issues contributed to lightness and elevated class status. The first was the fact that mythologically lightness is located in/as God’s body. The second was the conflation of lightness with class that existed in black communities historically. For example, Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, 24-36, point out, for example, that of DuBois’s “talented tenth,” a reference to the top 10% of African Americans, all but one (Phyllis Wheatley Peters) was “mulatto” (i.e., half white) and light complexioned. In other words, these black people were seen as the “*cream of the crop*” (pun intended).

Gender/Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are also factors in Muhammad's ideal bodily economy. Because they are seen as interrelated and co-constitutive elements that are defined and fixed metaphysically through the religious mythology of the NOI, they will be addressed together. NOI doctrine, in all historical phases, conforms to the naturalized view (as represented in Islam generally) that sexuality is ordered and fixed, and that heterosexuality is normative. Along those same lines, gendered relations between men and women are preset, given, and hierarchical, with men being the dominant partners. As such, gender and sexuality are regulated through discourse and the performativity of gendered regimentation and discipline, such as in the F.O.I. and the M.G.T.-G.C.C., but even in Mohammed's NOI (since he disbanded the F.O.I. and the M.G.T.-G.C.C.), education and labor are divided along gendered lines, and women's roles (seen as divinely ordered) are typically domestic. In this manner, gendered, sexed bodies become stabilized over time through the performance, the reiteration of the norm, and the citation of the language that justifies it and at the same time plays a role in the continuous formation and appearance of such bodies.⁵⁰

In such a system, men are the regulators of the ideal—and one should say—an ideal that only particular, “heterosexual” and “masculine,” men embody, which means that women and certain men are marginalized and/or relegated to a subservient class status within the religious group. What is interesting here is that while Muhammad was

⁵⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 1-2, 9, 12-3. Cf. Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 48-53, 112, 119.

the primary purveyor of such ideas about gender and sexuality, only the subjugated classes were held to its standards. For instance, he was neither masculine nor strong bodied, by many accounts. Essien-Udom describes him as “a man of small stature (about 5’6”). . . He is frail looking, but in fairly good health...[but has] high blood pressure.”⁵¹ Furthermore, Malcolm X frames him in feminine terms as “fragile, almost tiny”⁵² and “a little humble lamb.”⁵³ In addition, his extramarital sexual activity would seem to conflict with his rigid edicts regarding the behavior of the membership.⁵⁴

Malcolm, on the other hand, is always described “as the quintessential model of black masculinity”⁵⁵ in terms such as he was 6’3, trim, 175lbs-180lbs “broad-shouldered”

⁵¹ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 75.

⁵² Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 200.

⁵³ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 215.

⁵⁴ What I think these statements indicate is a tacit consciousness on the part of some members of the NOI and some scholars of the inherent conflict between Muhammad’s own body and the bodies that he was constructing as ideal. More importantly, the conflict indicates the manner in which power functions based on social position. In other words, Muhammad, being the Messenger of Allah, did not necessarily have to conform to the same aesthetics and ideals as those under his leadership.

⁵⁵ Manning Marable. *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 167.

man who was “mesmerizingly handsome” and well-groomed.⁵⁶ Similar language is spoken of for Farrakhan to a lesser extent,⁵⁷ but not for Mohammed, who was nevertheless considered masculine. Again, the point here is that ideal bodies are masculine and male (read: “heterosexual”), and that female bodies are most often contested sites where manhood is signified and challenged. For example, the crisis between Muhammad and Malcolm that led to Malcolm’s defection from the Nation was said to be over ideological differences, as Malcolm framed it, “our disagreement had been in terms of political direction and involvement in the extra-religious struggle for human rights.”⁵⁸ But Malcolm’s characterization of the issue was evasive at best and

⁵⁶ Marable, *Living Black History*, 137. This language is important in that it might help to indicate why Malcolm’s body was significant. Recall that the black people on Mars and Venus (who are the models of ideal physical black bodies) are eight and nine feet tall. See Chapter Two of my project.

⁵⁷ Lawrence H. Mamiya. “From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of a Movement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21.2 (1982): 141. Mamiya notes that Farrakhan resembles Malcolm in many significant ways including complexion. See, Chapter Five.

⁵⁸ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 360. Cf. Manning Marable, interview by author, Milwaukee, WI, October 5, 2007; See also, James H. Cone, interview by author, Milwaukee, WI, November 28, 2007. Both of these interviews provide extended conversations on Malcolm X and gender and sexuality that are too extensive to be explored in this section.

disingenuous at worst. The more pressing issue, it seems, involved power relations between them that played out in/on at least one black women's body as the contested site of desire. Muhammad did not express the same trepidation about naming the conflict as a fight over a woman, and he blamed Malcolm. Recorded in a speech delivered after Malcolm's death in 1965, Muhammad says, that:

He [Malcolm] went back to these girls who used to date him before he was married to his present wife, Betty. He had made several trips to Chicago and made many phone calls to Evelyn. He finally persuaded her to agree with him.⁵⁹

Apparently, Malcolm had been in love with Evelyn X Williams, who was a member of Temple #7 over which he was the minister. Muhammad suggests that because of Malcolm's feelings for Evelyn (and another woman named Lucille) that Malcolm went to the American media and spread rumors about him fathering their children.⁶⁰ But Malcolm must have been devastated that his mentor and religious leader was having sex and impregnated the woman he loved.⁶¹ Evelyn had been distraught after hearing about Malcolm's engagement to Betty, as she left the Temple in tears and New York and moved to Chicago.⁶² Manning Marable contends:

⁵⁹ Elijah Muhammad. *Blood Bath: The True Teaching of Malcolm X 'Seldom Told'* (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1990), 59.

⁶⁰ Muhammad, *Blood Bath*, 58.

⁶¹ Marable, interview by author.

⁶² Muhammad, *Blood Bath*, 59; cf. Marable, *Living Black History*, 172. Elijah

Muhammad hints that Malcolm was going to see Evelyn in Chicago after he married

Malcolm should not have been completely surprised by the sexual relationship culminating in pregnancies that developed between Muhammad and Evelyn X. Indeed, he later admitted in the *Autobiography* that ‘as far back as 1955, I had heard hints’ about Muhammad’s serial adultery. But the deep ambivalence that he felt concerning marriage in general, and the problems that Betty had with his controlling and patriarchal behavior, probably did not sustain a strong, trusting relationship between the two.⁶³

Marable confirms much of what I am arguing here. He affirms that the perceptions of issues of gender and sexuality were at the root of the conflict between Muhammad and Malcolm, which in the end, was an exercise in power by Muhammad. Marable also insists that Malcolm had misgivings about being married, which, to some extent, gave rise to some of the issues that Betty had about Malcolm as a husband.⁶⁴

Betty when he intimates that “He had made several trips to Chicago and made many phone calls to Evelyn.” Marable suggests that Malcolm remained in love with Evelyn throughout his marriage and even considered moving her back to New York from Chicago, but Farrakhan cautioned him against it, reminding him that he was a married man.

⁶³ Marable, *Living Black History*, 173.

⁶⁴ Marable, interview by author. According to Marable, Betty left Malcolm three times and was constantly critical of his inadequacies as a husband, among them that she was sexually unfulfilled.

Furthermore, such episodes may have been painful to Malcolm, despite his ostensibly unbreakable masculine “image.”⁶⁵ Malcolm had never desired to marry for reasons that may have had to do with his difficulty respecting women.⁶⁶ His public reason

⁶⁵ Unfortunately, Malcolm’s reified masculine image in the public imagination and in “scholarship” does not allow for an examination of his personal relationships in a manner that might disrupt this image. For example, literature suggests that Malcolm had difficulties being married. One of the areas in which he struggled was in his sexual performance. In a letter that he wrote to Elijah Muhammad on March 25, 1959 (owned by the Butterfields), he complained about Betty, who it seems had bruised his male ego. Betty had been complaining that he was not satisfying her sexually. This is interesting given that women in the NOI theoretically were the participants in male desire and reproduction. In my interview with Manning Marable, he suggested that despite NOI culture with respect to women, Malcolm wrote Muhammad both because his ego was hurt and because he did believe that Betty was entitled to sexual satisfaction as a woman. See, Marable, *interview by author*; Marable, *Living Black History*, 170-1.

⁶⁶ See, Marable, *interview by author*. Marable says of Malcolm’s attitude about women, “So that it is highly unlikely that egalitarian and sensitive and loving attachments were formed. These were exploitative relationships. So Malcolm did not have the kind of sexual or gender experience that upon which reciprocal relationships and trusting relationships are based. Just read the autobiography. He says, ‘You can’t trust any woman....that woman lie.’ And he says it repeatedly. . . So there is a deep thread of misogyny in Malcolm.”

was that he wanted to be free to serve the Nation, and he may have felt pressured to take a wife, given that he desired to remain single.⁶⁷ Again, his marriage to Betty Shabazz was

⁶⁷ Marable, *Living Black History*, 169-70; Cf. Bruce Perry. *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, Inc., 1991), 16, 28-9, 77, 82-3, 96, 115, 129, 197. Perry interviewed numerous close friends, family, and associates in his biography of Malcolm X, and he discovered that Malcolm had had same-sex erotic and sexual interactions with men on numerous occasions prior to joining the NOI. For example, Malcolm's childhood friend, Bob Bebee reportedly masturbated Malcolm in a school bathroom and that the boy gave Malcolm oral sex. Furthermore, Malcolm worked for a wealthy man by the name of William Paul Lennon, for whom Malcolm's friend, Malcolm Jarvis, claimed that "Lennon paid Malcolm to disrobe him, place him on his bed, sprinkle him with talcum powder, and massage him until he reached climax" (83). Furthermore, Perry reports that Malcolm admitted to prostituting himself to men but that "Malcolm's income-producing homosexual activity was sporadic" (83). Lest anyone think that same-sex interactions were simply a commodification of sex as a hustle for the purpose of making money, two of Malcolm's friends from Harlem reported that Malcolm bragged about having sex with "queers" and that he claimed that "they suck dick" (77) and reportedly having consensual sex in Michigan with a transvestite named Willie Mae. If Perry's conclusions are accurate, and I find no reason to deny them, then it goes far (along with Marable's work, Malcolm's issues with sex and Betty Shabazz) to explain some of the issues that he had with women,

a whirlwind wedding that happened in a matter of days, with little to no planning. Hence, Malcolm viewed it as an arranged marriage. To that end, one way of reading Malcolm's marriage is as a move by Muhammad to occupy Malcolm in order to lessen the competition for sex with desirable women, in particular Evelyn Williams.⁶⁸

The point is that masculine men's bodies constituted a major aspect of Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy. Women's bodies were often treated, like Muhammad says metaphorically as "fields," in which male power played out and was reproduced, socially and biologically.⁶⁹ This most certainly can be seen in the conflict between Malcolm and Muhammad. In this case, Malcolm's putative masculinity and physicality made him attractive, given that he approached the ideal. But his physical stature and attractiveness was a two-edge sword, since it also gave rise to jealous rivalries. Perhaps his body, more than any ideological issues, gave rise to his downfall in the Nation—that while he was a

sex, and romance. Unfortunately, such data does not gain adequate attention in work on Malcolm.

⁶⁸ See, Marable, interview by author; Marable, *Living Black History*, 170-3; Muhammad, *Blood Bath*, 59. Yet, this apparently did not keep Malcolm from expressing his love for Evelyn, who had moved to Chicago after Malcolm became engaged to Betty.

⁶⁹ Farrakhan, 7 *Speeches*, 16. Farrakhan echoes this notion in the early 1970s, where he frames the contest over black women's bodies as between black men and white men, claiming that the white man has "destroyed us through our women. And the only way the Black Man can ever be rebuilt is through the same thing that white people used to bring us down."

member of the dominant class in the Nation, he, nevertheless, hit a glass ceiling since more than anyone he embodied Muhammad's ideal—making him a dangerous rival to the Messenger himself.

Mohammed and Farrakhan do offer some significant but nominal exceptions to the dominant role that men have played in the NOI, although it is still doubtful that patriarchy had been overturned. As stated earlier in this chapter, Mohammed appointed three prominent women to leadership positions within his group including Sonia Sanchez,⁷⁰ but one can argue, and I indeed do, that these selections reflected Mohammed's own class consciousness.⁷¹ As explored in Chapter Five, Mohammed

⁷⁰ James S. Tinney. "Bilalian Muslims." *Christianity Today* 20.12 (March 12, 1976): 51-2. Tinney notes that "Members of the Nation of Islam can now salute the American flag, engage in electoral politics, dress in a more self-styled manner, and even serve as members of the armed forces" to serve the American government in its military and political interests. Among specific changes that Tinney observes are that women are allowed to wear pants, jazz was played at mosques, and the Nation planned to produce movies. Finally, three women were made leaders, Sharolyn X, the first minister, who holds graduate degrees from Rutgers, Fatimah Ali, formerly a Purdue professor was made regional director, and Sonia Sanchez led the office that produced textbooks for Muslim schools. Note the apparent class consciousness, given the prominent statuses of these women.

⁷¹ Mamiya, "From Black Muslim to Bilalian." Mamiya argues that one unintended consequence of Farrakhan leaving Mohammed's organization to rebuild the Nation was

continued to maintain that the subjugation of women to men was metaphysically fixed by God.⁷² To the contrary, to some extent, that is, Farrakhan has actually made more substantive moves with respect to gender than his three predecessors. Farrakhan's Nation

that Mohammed's group became thoroughly middle-class, while Farrakhan's group was left with the more working-class membership. While Mamiya's conclusions are helpful, given they raise very important class issues within the Nation, the point that his position implies is that the Nation was not already "middle-class." On the contrary, what I am arguing in this project and particularly in the final section of this chapter is that the NOI was middle class in all four moments, given that the group co-opted middle class values and called them "Muslim." Furthermore, I am suggesting that Muhammad's NOI was "classist" in that he associated the major problems of black people to behavior and values that he ascribed to poor African Americans. To argue that Muhammad's NOI could not have been classist because they were primarily working class is to misconstrue the nature and forms of "capital," which are wide ranging and not limited to socioeconomic factors, for example, symbolic and moral capital. See the final section of this chapter for a discussion. See also, Farrakhan, *7 Speeches*, 59-60, where he discusses the active rise of the NOI among middle-class African Americans in the early 1970s, well before Mohammed took over the Nation.

⁷² W. Deen Mohammed. *An African American Genesis* (Calumet City, IL: M.A.C.A. Publication Fund, 1986), 33.

has prominent women who are visible within his inner circle.⁷³ One obvious confidant is his wife Mother Khadijah Farrakhan. But three other women play preeminent roles in the Nation. Perhaps the one with the more prominent position is Minister Ava Muhammad, who holds a law degree from Georgetown Law Center, and was the first women to be appointed to leadership of an NOI mosque and as Farrakhan's Southeastern representative in 1998.⁷⁴ Second, Mother Tynetta Muhammad, a former secretary of Elijah Muhammad, who bore him a son (Minister Ishmael Muhammad), has seen her stature transformed from a woman who had an extramarital affair with the Messenger to being regarded as one of the Mothers of the Nation. She is clearly one of the more influential spiritual leaders in the Nation and part of Farrakhan's inner circle.⁷⁵ She, along

⁷³ Farrakhan, 7 *Speeches*, 26. Earlier in the 1970s Farrakhan understood black women as "a man's greatest *possession*." Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁴ See, Minister Ava Muhammad. *A New Unit of Measurement: The Ministry of Farrakhan Muhammad and the Freedom of the Woman in the 21st Century* (Stone Mountain, GA: Lovekare Productions, 2000); Minister Ava Muhammad. *Queen of the Planet Earth: The Rebirth and Rise of the Original Woman* (Stone Mountain, GA: Lovekare Productions, 1997). These texts are primarily apologetic in nature in that they provide a defense of Farrakhan (and Muhammad) by attempting to lift up the women who play a role in his inner circle and by reporting the significance of women in his ministry.

⁷⁵ See, Tynetta Muhammad. *The Comer by Night 1986* (Chicago, IL: The Honorable Elijah Muhammad Educational Foundation, 1986). Mother Tynetta is a spiritual advisor

with Mother Khadijah, was present with Farrakhan when he experienced the UFO/Mother Wheel, the most important religious event of his ministry. Finally, Sister Claudette Marie Muhammad is Farrakhan's National Chief of Protocol. She travels with him and organizes his activities.⁷⁶ She was also Deputy Director for the Million Man March.

On the issue of homosexuality, however, neither Farrakhan nor Mohammed have changed positions in terms of their doctrines in opposition to it. Notwithstanding, it is very interesting to note the contrast in Farrakhan's public conversations about it from the early 1970s, when he was the National Representative for Elijah Muhammad and now. In a 1971 speech called "The Black Women," Farrakhan said the following:

Hogs love filth. . . Do you know that the hog is sodomous? A male hog will lie down with a male hog: hog-eaters do the same. Male runnin' after a male talkin' 'bout it's NATIONTIME. Now that's not right, brother. Is it? It's not right, brother, and it's wrong for you to say, 'well that man is funny.' And you're having some sexual relationship with a man, talkin' 'bout 'that cat's funny.'

to Minister Farrakhan who has a Sufi orientation and interprets events of his ministry vis-à-vis his 1985 UFO experience using numerology (i.e., "mathematics").

⁷⁶ See, Claudette Marie Muhammad. *Memories* (Chicago: Final Call, Inc., 2007). I met Sister Muhammad in person in 2005, and we corresponded in 2008 about the possibility of my interviewing Minister Farrakhan for this research. She sent a message through her secretary informing me that she would do "everything she can" to make the interview happen, to no avail, but I was sincerely appreciative for her efforts.

Well what kind of funniness is in you to make you even desire to have sex with a man? That's sick. And the same way with the sisters.⁷⁷

Farrakhan characterizes male and female "homosexuality" as a sickness. He, like Muhammad, frames it as "filth" and connects it to foods that the NOI considers unclean, the greatest of which is the hog. On the other hand, in his Saviour's Day address called "One Nation Under God," in which I was present in Detroit (February 25, 2007) Farrakhan rebuffed those who would call him homophobic or "anti-gay" (as well as anti-semitic, "anti-white"), "none of which I am," he retorts. Rather, he claims, these notions are applied to him by people who wanted to turn people against him.⁷⁸ In the end, he has made no public or published claims to accept gay people into the leadership of the NOI. Masculine and male remain factors that reappear in Farrakhan's NOI from his mentor's ideal black bodily economy. Finally, Mohammed makes an inflammatory claim when he equates homosexuality to bestiality: "All of the things that we read about in the Bible are being done today. Homosexuality and going with animals it's in the Bible."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Farrakhan, *7 Speeches*, 25.

⁷⁸ Louis Farrakhan, "One Nation Under God," speech delivered to Saviour's Day convention, Detroit, MI, February 25, 2007. His thesis was that the world religions and human beings have to evolve and see themselves as one world, although he still predicted "tribulation" for the U.S. because of its injustice.

⁷⁹ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth*, 65. Cf. 77 where he speaks of black men becoming "a bunch of pampered sissies" because of their styles of attire.

Class

What all of the factors of this economy constitute is an ambiguous class system, understood as hierarchical groupings that are based upon given distinctions.⁸⁰ Such class

⁸⁰ Although historically class has been viewed in terms of caste and financial economy (e.g., via Marxism), I want to understand class as much more expansive and complex than mere socioeconomic indicators. In this dissertation, I seek to re-read and analyze class through as a hierarchical system of ordering which then produces cultural, social, and symbolic stratifications that are not dependent solely on socioeconomic markers that signify class distinction. That is to say, the NOI, in this case, is a structuring structure or religious field in a Bourdieuan sense and as a symbolic system of classification, that seeks to hierarchicalize and scale “lower-class” black bodies into more decent and respectable bodies through religious rituals of social, economic, and cultural, and symbolic advancement. In this sense, the NOI offers a religious field whereby and in which participants undergo a restructuring of disadvantage and are re-made and are given access to various forms of capital (vis-à-vis religion), which increases the life options of those who were structurally and systematically marginalized under a system of white supremacy and economic exploitation. In other words, Muhammad created a religious economy of difference in which those who did not conform bodily (i.e., others) were cast as “poor,” ignorant, deviant. Furthermore, the intention was clearly class mobility, and as this dissertation has pointed out, Muhammad co-opted and recast explicit ideals and practices of middle-class white and black Americans and signified them as Muslim. As a result, the religion of Islam created, monitored, and deployed symbolic and cultural

issues manifest themselves in two ways. First, the NOI reflected middle class American values generally, despite the fact that their origins were working class. Second, proximity or distance from Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy constructed indeterminate and informal classes within the Nation. Both of these reflect class consciousness and the aesthetics of mythology which influenced morality, decorum, proper conduct, bodily care, sexual propriety, etc.,⁸¹ that is, "civilizationism"⁸² (or perhaps the aesthetics mythology influenced class concerns in more of a reciprocal relationship).

First, the NOI was a "middle class" organization.⁸³ Some scholars might interpret such a statement to be a contradiction, since the NOI had its origins among working class African Americans. What is meant, here, is two-fold—both that the NOI, through its emphasis on clean living, hard work, and thrift, provided an opportunity for entrée into the middle classes and that the dominant ethos reflected middle class American values

capital as a form of higher class vis-à-vis poor black people and African American Christians in particular.

⁸¹ Curtis, "Islamizing the Black Body," 169,177-8. Curtis suggests that the NOI was in imitating *black* middle class values, while Essien-Udom simply locates them as simply middle class, seemingly "white." Cf. Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 126, who also associates them with "white Anglo-Saxon Protestant" middle classes.

⁸² Curtis, "Islamizing the Black Body," 177-8.

⁸³ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 84-119; Cf. Curtis, "Islamizing the Black Body";

and aspirations.⁸⁴ Many black churches made the same appeal in order to increase status and acceptability within the larger culture and in the eyes of the dominant group. In fact, the NOI most likely borrowed such practices from black churches, whose former members were the majority of its makeup. Speaking specifically of Muhammad's Nation in the early 1960s, Essien-Udom maintains that the NOI identified mostly with the middle class black people rather than poor African Americans and that the "ideal type" [of] Muslim, as suggested by the NOI, could not be found in "lower-class society."⁸⁵ I interpret this to mean, similar to the bodily economy that reflects Muhammad's ideal, that such a body is thoroughly middle class. And it is Muhammad's economy, this section contends, that shows up in each of the four moments. In fact, that the NOI under Elijah

⁸⁴ See, Clifton E. Marsh. *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 3, 22-4. Furthermore, the working classes are understood as not having or owning the means of production and have no controlling voice in the governing of society, privileges which belong to the middle and ruling classes. Another significant distinction between working and middle classes is that the working classes are more closely associated with "nature," such as agriculture, farming, etc. See, Max Weber. *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 96-7. What I am suggesting here is that the NOI associated such values and activities with the middle class, not with poorer black populations, who were seen as less moral and industrious and more prone to social instability and disorder. The NOI, however, by changing the field of production to religion, co-opted such class markers.

⁸⁵ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 110.

Muhammad *re-produces* and *re-deploys* classist and internalized racist attitudes toward lower-class African Americans (i.e., black bodies *in-place*) that originated in the larger society may reflect their desire for respectability in the sight of whites.⁸⁶ For instance, Essien-Udom claims:

The Muslim males' attitude toward, and treatment of, Negro women contrasts sharply with the disrespect and indifference with which the lower-class Negroes treat them. Muhammad's black woman has an appeal for black women seeking to escape from their lowly and humiliating position in Negro society and from the predatory sex ethos of the lower-class community. A refuge from these is found in the Nation of Islam, and freedom from sexual exploitation.⁸⁷

What Essien-Udom sees going on in Muhammad's NOI, in the language of my project, is an endeavor to identity with and co-opt the class values of the larger population in an attempt to rise from the degradation of poverty and the association of such with black bodies. In addition, what he sees functioning in this effort is an exercise in power relations vis-à-vis the bodies of black women on the part of black men, who, by controlling the "respectability" of black women, can then be in a position to command recognition from black women. Such a move is made necessary, Essien-Udom might suggest, because he interprets African American society as matriarchal, therefore: "the

⁸⁶ Edward E. Curtis, IV. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 96.

⁸⁷ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 86.

movement has attraction for Negro men, because their male ego has been subordinated to the females in Negro society.”⁸⁸

To this end, Chapters Two and Three argued that such a black body constructed vis-à-vis Muhammad’s ideal black bodily economy stood in stark contrast to other black bodies and was meant to differentiate between them. Essen-Udom suggests the same when he says that “The pervasiveness of the middle-class spirit and aspirations among the Muslims cannot escape the attention of a keen observer. This spirit differentiates them fundamentally from the vast majority of lower-class Negroes.” Lee makes a similar conclusion as Essen-Udom when she says “all of these [practices] set the Muslims apart from other Blacks.”⁸⁹ Such interpretations miss that fact that while ritualization of middle class practices and discourses was meant to distinguish NOI bodies physically from other black bodies (*in-place*), they represented symbolically the entire race or what the race could become. Curtis comes closer to what I am suggesting when he noted that “This kind of resistance centered on making the body look and act in ways consciously different from what the white mainstream and the black middle-class expected.”⁹⁰ Their failures theoretically can be attributed to the fact that none of them, especially Curtis who speaks explicitly of the body, but has no concrete definition of the body that posits the body as flesh and symbol.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Essen-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 84

⁸⁹ Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 130.

⁹⁰ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 178.

⁹¹ See my Chapter One.

Furthermore, while they are all acutely aware of extant class issues within the NOI, they make the mistake of understanding class simply in terms of socioeconomic status. For the NOI, “class” status is not simply a matter of social and economic station, but of other forms of *capital*, such as tastes, morality, religious knowledge, and organizational position that function symbolically and cultural in giving the possessor certain amounts of prestige, authority, and access to goods and services.⁹² As a system of exchange in the NOI, such capital represented by proximity and representation of Muhammad’s ideal economy was made into a hegemonic force that was utilized, not only to police the worldview and practices of poor black people, but also of black people who were middle class in socioeconomic orientation. Thus, “lower class” cannot be understood as simply as signifying “poor” in social and economic terms. Such a disposition or gaze from the NOI would have also signified African American Christians (the epitome of black bodies *in-place* for Muhammad) as such, who proved their lower class status through the conspicuous consumption of “slave foods,” such as pork and black-eyed peas.⁹³ According to Muhammad, “The Southern slave masters used them (i.e., slave foods) to feed the slaves, and still advise the consumption of them. Most white people of the middle and upper class do not eat this lot of cheap food, which is unfit for human consumption.”⁹⁴

⁹² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 6, 36, 40-1, 47, 54-60, 89, 171-84.

⁹³ See Chapters Two and Three.

⁹⁴ Muhammad, *How to Eat*. Book One, 5.

Second, as alluded to above, the strength of adherence to or conformity with Muhammad's ideal black bodily economy functioned as forms of cultural and symbolic capital that were efficacious in signifying "class" status within the NOI in all four moments because the NOI changed, modified, and/or extended the field of practice from socioeconomic to religious. Hence, they were "successfully" able to disrupt⁹⁵ the otherwise totalizing and deterministic reproduction of the lower class *habitus* which characterized black bodies *in-place* and, for them, mirrored the racist social system. In this sense, they were able to reform black people in the "mud," the lowest form of abjection,⁹⁶ expelled by the guarantors of the social order.

These forms of capital worked in concert with traditional notions of class to create an ethos and culture within the NOI that henceforth attracted those who were "middle class" by virtue of their education, wealth, etc. This class consciousness, I have argued, is rooted in the aesthetics of NOI mythology and plays out on/in the body as the body also becomes a product of the effects it names.⁹⁷ Likewise, it is this confluence of various notions of capital that constructed and stabilized black bodies *out-of-place* over time as

⁹⁵ To clarify this issue, the NOI was able to "disrupt" the reiteration of a certain form and deployment of white supremacy and lower class embodiment, albeit what I am suggesting is that they *re-cast* an *intra-race* class system that endured throughout the moments of the Nation. In other words, they exchanged one form for another.

⁹⁶ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-4.

⁹⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2, 9.

middle class through the performativity (i.e., the reiteration and citation) of the discourses and practices that call forth in its appearance. This middle class body is of such an enduring aspect of the NOI (because it is naturalized and normalized) that it shows up in the discourses of all four moments of this project. We have already acknowledged that it is given its initial iteration in the ministry of Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm X embodies an ambiguous “class” status in terms of Muhammad’s ideal bodily economy as we have already suggested. In short, other forms of cultural capital were also extant in his thought. For example, he suggested that, although he had not attended college, he had learned and read more in his prison studies from the philosophy and theology of Elijah Muhammad and Asian, African, and European history than most black Ph.D.s, whom he considered inferior to him because they were brainwashed.⁹⁸ He also indicated his class consciousness and his identification with the middle class when he suggested that he “respected upper-class Negroes,”⁹⁹ who never “conked” their hair, a mechanical alteration of the hair that involved a painful process of the application of chemicals in order to make black hair resemble straight white hair.¹⁰⁰ Conking for him was the ultimate symbol of accepting white racism’s definition of blackness. This was a practice of lower-class African Americans.

In the thought and practice of Warith Deen Mohammed can be seen evidence of class focus. Scholars have noted the apparent rise in middle class membership in the

⁹⁸ Malcolm, *Autobiography*, 158-71, 176-90.

⁹⁹ Malcolm, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Malcolm, *Autobiography*, 56.

Nation after he took over the organization and after Farrakhan left to begin his own.¹⁰¹ I have already indicated my modification of the position that Lawrence Mamiya takes when he argues for a class division between Mohammed's middle class movement and Farrakhan's "lower class" group.¹⁰² Specifically, Mohammed was critical of African Americans generally, who had become "the welfare class,"¹⁰³ since the 1960s, when black people were more independent and cultured due to the Black Power movement. Yet, this class consciousness was already present in the initial interactions between Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan (noted in Chapter 6). Having been college educated, Farrakhan suggests that his initial trepidation about joining the organization had to do with his interpretation of Muhammad's *lack* of "class" status in traditional terms. Farrakhan noted that Muhammad's speech betrayed his limited education and social standing. On the other hand, Farrakhan was aware later in his career under Muhammad that the middle class ethos and forms of cultural capital were attracting a different kind of

¹⁰¹ For example, Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, 92; Mamiya, *From Black Muslims to Bilalians*, 138, 145-8.

¹⁰² Rather, I have argued for a much more expansive and complex view of class and the forms of capital that inform it, albeit I do agree, in part, for the unintended consequences of a protestant work ethic that led to a rise in class status. This project has suggested that this unintended consequence of class movement can be applied to the entire movement not simply Mohammed's moment.

¹⁰³ Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, 79.

aspirant in black communities, who were middle class in the socioeconomic sense.¹⁰⁴

Embedded in Farrakhan's calling to the ministry of the NOI was this desire and responsibility to take the message of Muhammad and translate it for middle class black people. The greatest symbol of Farrakhan's cultural capital that could indicate his proximity to Muhammad's ideal was his elevation to the rank of minister of Harlem's Temple #7, which he said occurred before Malcolm's "defection."¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

What I have attempted to show in this chapter, and indeed this project, is that the Nation of Islam in all its critical moments, represented by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan was concerned about the actual and symbolic violence directed at black bodies, both as physical realities and as symbols of given collective cultures and cosmologies. Such violence, through discourses disfigured and devalued black bodies, and through social institutions of slavery, lynching, the penal system, and oppression, severely restricted the life outcomes and possibilities and which manifested itself in multiple psychological and biological anomalies, not the least of which was reduced life span and numerous health problems. Therefore, what I have demonstrated, in short, is that the body was the central concern of the Nation in all moments as they sought to reform the body that had been constructed by/in the racist social system, and that black bodies were recalcitrant, rather than totalized by the system.

¹⁰⁴ Farrakhan, *7 Speeches*, 59-60.

¹⁰⁵ Farrakhan, *7 Speeches*, 147.

Yet, the NOI was responding to a particular kind of body, what I called, using Douglas's theory of "dirt," black bodies *in-place*. For the Nation, these were the bodies that had been made grotesque by white supremacy—both in their physical and cultural aesthetic and meaning, and these were bodies which did not discursively (i.e., symbolically) or bodily (i.e., socially) challenge the social order which relegated them to their *in-placeness*, limiting their life options and curtailing their existence. The NOI saw these bodies as slavish and buffoonish—as existing in service of their own domination and the oppression of their people. The epitome of such bodies for Muhammad was "Negro" Christians, especially preachers. It would seem that this perspective held true in all the moments, given that they were all critical of Christianity and how it functioned as an ideology and practice to construct and maintain systems of oppression.

The bodies that the NOI constructed in response to black bodies *in-place* and the racist system which constituted them and stabilized them through philosophical, scientific, and theological discourses this project has called black bodies *out-of-place*. The overarching problem, however, is that the NOI failed to take seriously its own oppressive practices and therefore, the bodies that were constituted in its programs and discourses in many ways appeared as black composites of black bodies constructed through white discourses and violence. Some of the more problematic aspects were the Nation's homophobia and sexism that it failed to acknowledge in any of the four moments of this work. Moreover, its critique of African American Christianity, while sometimes valid with respect to its social analysis, obscures a significant part of the Nation's origins which it owes to the Black Church. In short, because of the absence of reflexivity and institutional structures that would allow them to avoid becoming the

oppressors that they despised, the Nation came to be an organization that policed bodies within the group and in African American communities in unhealthy ways.

While the Nation was largely “successful” in their reformation of black bodies that were viewed and treated in America as the least valuable (i.e., in the “mud”), such reformative discourses and activities took various forms in the moments of the Nation. Yet, one of the revolutionary and yet troubling aspects of the NOI’s response to racism in their effort to reform and reconstitute black bodies *in-place* was that they engaged issues that they saw as produced by racism and converted them into “class” terms in there reformative programs. As a strategy, it may have been that symbols of class could be more easily accessed, re-signified, and re-deployed than changing the deep structurally embedded presence of white supremacy in the social system of America. Therefore, the Nation co-opted middle class values and practices, which they used to give new religious meaning to black bodies. Edward Curtis, states it well when he suggests:

. . . NOI members recast civilizationism in a way that rejected its associations with black [or white] middle-class Christian ideology while preserving some of its most fundamental norms. Put in terms of a simple semiotic exercise: The ritualized body was a sign. NOI members separated the signifier—here the ritualizing of the body—from what was normally signified—a capitulation to the values, norms, and beliefs of the oppressor. In so doing, the old signifier now pointed toward a new signified: the islamicized black body.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Curtis, “Islamizing the Black Body,” 178.

Although insightful in elucidating how middle class practices and ideology was co-opted by the NOI so as to avoid the identification of their origins in white America, Curtis does not go far enough in his analysis. Such class attentiveness by the NOI is both mundane and revolutionary. What is mundane about the NOI's middle class American sensibilities is that in many ways the NOI is very *American* rather than as radical and *dangerous* as they are often portrayed. What is radical about the NOI, on the other hand, is that they co-opted white Anglo ideals of civilizationism as resistance to the negative meanings that were attached to black bodies and gave it a new name—"Muslim." It is revolutionary in the sense that Anglo values were unattainable as "white," which the NOI quite obviously could never be. What was exceedingly creative was the manner in which the disconnected Anglo values from their original signification that was attached white bodies and redeployed them so as to obscure their origins and hence any ideological conflicts. With the co-optation, nonetheless, came the problematic issue of class discrimination regardless of how indiscretely class functioned.

In other words, what I am suggesting is the critical thrust of this project—namely, that the NOI, in their attempt to re-imaging and re-present the "race," having recoded—to terms of class consciousness—their concerns brought on by symbolic and actual violent experiences of racism, not only created a rudimentary class system, but socially reproduced hierarchical "classes" in their discourses and practices that were stabilized by the ritualizing and performativity of the aesthetics of mythology found in the cosmological narrative of Yakub and grounded in the body of Master Fard Muhammad. What for Muhammad were the factors that made up ideal black bodies—his ideal black bodily economy—functioned as the markers of class status, which means that they also

served as markers for subjugation. Given that cultural capital was garnered as a function of the approximation of such embodied economy, and the factors of the ideal economy were Muslim, male, masculine, healthy, adult, “middle-class,” heterosexual, mystical-esoteric, light complexioned, and “intelligent”/gifted, discrimination was inevitable. Bodies that did not conform to this ideal were limited in their possibilities within the organization. Karl Evanzz noticed something similar in his massive study of the NOI:

Muhammad selected ministers based on a ranking system which included intelligence, oratorical skills, and physical features. The whole skin-color issue was among the NOI’s more bizarre standards, as it dated back to the era when the treatment of a slave depended upon how close his skin shade was to the master’s whiteness.¹⁰⁷

I argued earlier that leadership and prominence in the NOI is determined by proximity to the ideal, and that such class consciousness and ideal results from the internalization and *re*-production of white supremacist culture including its sexism and homophobia, which is therefore never fully sublated in NOI mythology.

Deployed via NOI classist hegemony in all four moments, then, is the marginalization and relative denigration both within the NOI and larger African American community of a default and “lower-class” economy that is represented in classist terms as Christian, female, effeminate male, “homosexual” (LGBTQ), dark complexioned, “integrationist,” working class/poor, disabled, child, and so on. These economies, particularly the ideal economy, can be seen to function throughout the life of

¹⁰⁷ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 288.

the NOI, as it was reiterated in each. Owing to the durability of Muhammad's ideal was the fact that it was mythologically located in God's "*black*" body and sacralized but not sufficiently criticized and deconstructed as virulent by the leadership of the Nation. Perhaps the most insidious aspect was the sacralization of "lightness" which could be read as "whiteness."

Finally, this project notes that implicit in such an economy is its own taxonomy and its own notion of "dirt" that is embedded in its own mythology and that this lower class economy may represent what is dangerous and polluting vis-à-vis their own cosmologies. In the end, the NOI via Master Fard Muhammad created its own classificatory system that lacked the sophistication and fluidity to account for the enormous complexity and diversity among African Americans, so that many of the people it claimed to represent and want to "save" were marginalized and demonized by its demagoguery and discourses. Ensnared in its own institutional commitments, perhaps the Nation of Islam was unable to see its own practices as oppressive and to apprehend within them the influences and practices of white supremacy which they recast and deployed while calling them "Muslim."

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